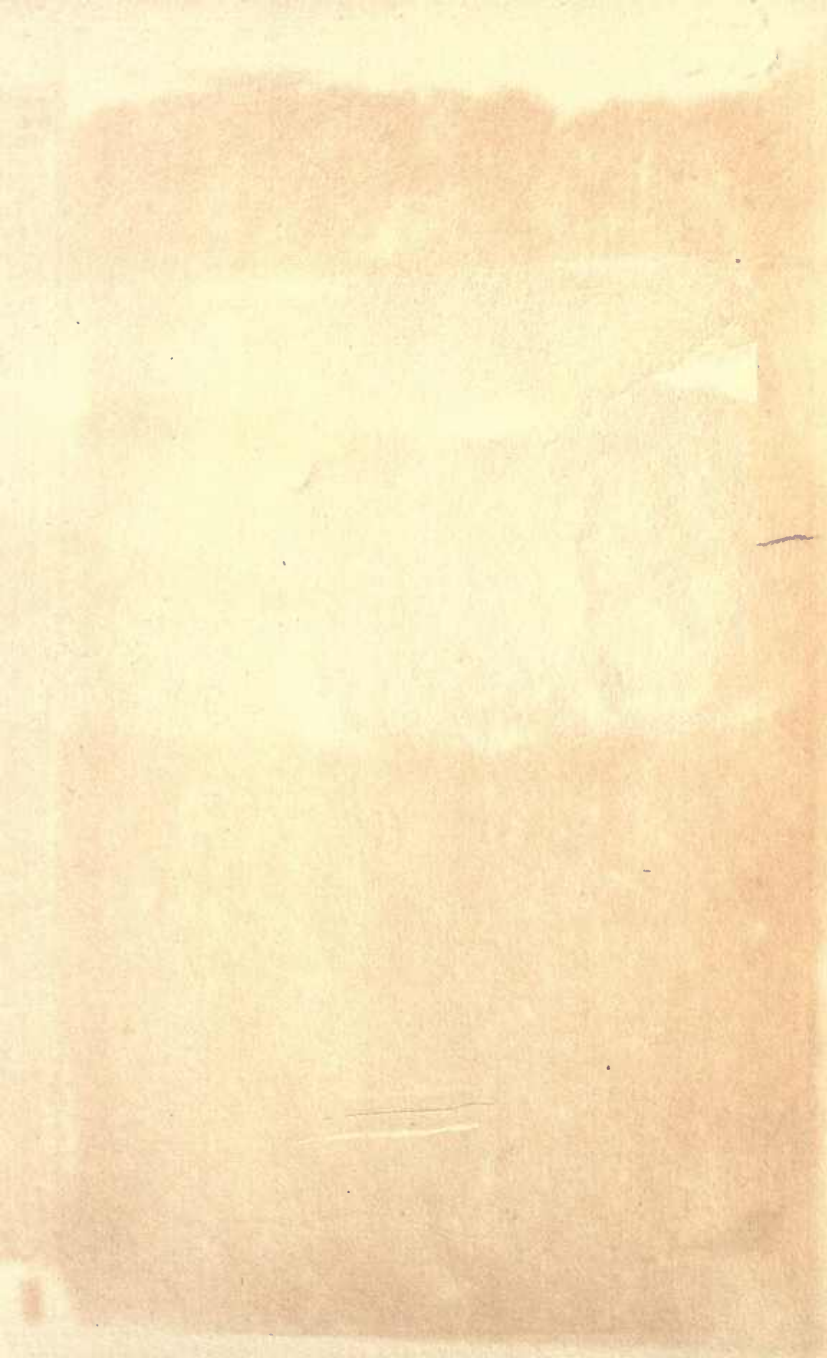


Glamour

W. B. MAXWELL



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By

W. B. MAXWELL

AUTHOR OF

*The Devil's Garden, The Mirror and the Lamp
Life Can Never be the Same, etc., etc.*



INDIANAPOLIS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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Printed in the United States of America

PRESS OF
BRAUNWORTH & CO.
BOOK MANUFACTURERS
BROOKLYN, N. Y.

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I

THE time before the war has already become so vague, so difficult to recall, that one is compelled to examine old files of illustrated newspapers, political reviews, and literary magazines in order to find out what people looked like, what they were doing, and what they were thinking. It was said that they thought too much about their food; but that seems absurd. For they had food. They were too sceptical and cynical; but that seems equally absurd. For they trusted Germany's good faith. They were quarrelling and ready to fight about Ireland; and that really seems most absurd of all—as though two oarsmen were rolling about in the bottom of a small boat, clawing each other and calling each other names, just before the boat slid over Niagara Falls.

All used to agree that nothing can be more contemptible than ingratitude; and yet in big things, if not in small, one seems to remember that this virtue was very rare. It was bad form to speak slightly of people you had dined with, and only the worst sort of snobs did so. But people kicked down the ladders on which they had risen, trod on the hands that had pushed them up, brought a heap of bricks and rubbish on kind heads below in their last frantic scramble to get on top of the wall, and did not even look back to see if anyone was hurt. No one blamed them for this; no one expected them to do anything else.

Think of the ingratitude of children to parents—taking all, giving nothing in return. Think of the ingratitude shown sometimes by wives to husbands; but, above all, think of the ingratitude of husbands to wives.

Bryan Vaile, the playwright, *did* think of it. He made it the artfully concealed thesis of two of his most popular plays. His work was not, of course, didactic, and it had no true moral philosophy, or it would not have been successful; but he did contrive to get across the footlights the healthy common-sense view that the obligations of husbands and wives are mutual and of equal force, and to convey his own firm belief that the man should be entirely faithful to the woman—in thought as well as in act—loyal and faithful, and grateful. He was very strong about the gratitude.

But then, Bryan Vaile was unusually happy in his marriage, and he had the best of reasons for being grateful to his wife. She had done so much for him. But for her he would not have been a successful playwright: he would not have been anything at all.

Yet in the beginning he had wanted to marry her. She was not his first love.

The real story of his life started in 1903; till then all had been colourless. In 1902 he was thirty-three, and he felt very old and tired, nearly worn out, and already thinking of himself as a failure; but as soon as he wrote the new date delightful things began to happen, and he felt very young again and full of hope. It was going to be a glorious year for him.

His prospects at the bar suddenly lightened; briefs came to him, and he appeared in sensational cases, so that his name was in the newspapers. Stories that he had sent to magazines were accepted; his golf handicap was reduced; a famous actress played in a one-act piece that he

had written; and his step-mother changed her mind about letting her flat in Maddox Street and said he might use it all the time she was away. That was a convenience as well as an economy for him. At the end of the hunting season he rode his only two horses in point-to-point races, getting a first and second place, and selling the clever but elderly animals at a fancy price afterwards. And the sun continued to shine. All the world seemed willing to smile at him and take notice of him, instead of allowing him to pass as something vague and meaningless in the changing and unexplored background of their own lives. Every door seemed to open to him. Without apparent reason, important personages were kind and friendly to him; and, surprised at being there, not thinking for a moment that he ought to be there, or that any special merit or virtue had brought him there, he often found himself in what used to be called great houses. Here he met all sorts of famous and interesting people—amongst others, Diana Kenion.

He saw her first at a dance, and he was still so ignorant that he had to ask somebody to tell him her name. Diana—it seemed to him at once that she could not have been called anything else. She was dressed in pale blue, and round her neck she had a long scarf or streamer of blue gauze that floated in the air as she moved, making her like a nymph. He hung about, not doing his duty and dancing, but trying to get someone to introduce him to her, and he succeeded at the last possible moment, just when she was leaving.

As everybody else knew, Diana Kenion had been out and about for two years, and was an established institution. She had from the first exercised ascendancy over a group of other pretty girls and young married women, who formed a court for her, and admired her perhaps

more than most young men did. But truly it became the fashion to admire her, and all who wished to be in the fashion had to accept her without question as a uniquely delightful phenomenon. She could act and she could sing. No grand charity tableaux were complete without her. Famous artists painted her portrait, budding poets dedicated volumes to her, grave politicians loved to talk to her. She was supposed to be brilliantly clever, and very witty.

She lived in Bruton Street with her father, who had obtained a divorce from her mother many years ago, and somewhere about the world there were half-sisters and brothers of Diana, much older than she. Sir Gerald Kenion, the father, had been a soldier, then governor of colonies; now he was director of companies, and a fine, distinguished-looking old buck, very much cherished by dowagers, but already verging towards the state described as "ga-ga." At the little house in Bruton Street Diana gave luncheon parties for him, asking clever people, pretty people—the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Russian actress out of the Empire ballet, the young man who had flown in a machine heavier than air—anybody. No one ever refused her invitations, and old Sir Gerald was willing to believe that all guests came to see him, but he was dazed by this varied company. He knew such photographed celebrities as the Prime Minister by sight, so he was sure when *they* came; he knew his dowagers by name and immediately recognized them in their own houses, although not certain of spotting them elsewhere; and for the rest he was splendidly vague, as courteous and kindly to strangers as to old friends, filling in blanks with "my dear lady" and "my dear sir," and sustaining a cheery conversation that was made up chiefly of ejaculations—"Upon my soul, now! Bless me,

where's Diana? My dear fellow—by Jove! How nice this is!"

Soon now girl friends at the luncheon parties were talking about Diana's clever man—Bryan.

"Have you seen Diana's new clever man?"

"Yes. *Is* he clever?"

"I don't know. Diana says so."

"He's good-looking—in a way. And he rides all right. He was riding with Diana before breakfast this morning."

Two of her most faithful friends and admirers, those beautiful girls, Lady Violet Kingsland and Lady Sybil Fauldhouse, became a little anxious in regard to this matter.

"Diana," said Lady Violet, "has told me to get Mr. Vaile asked to the Bembridges for a week-end."

"Can you manage it?"

"Oh, of course. I'd manage anything in the world for Diana. But it set me thinking."

"What," asked Lady Sybil, "does Bryan Vaile do with himself?"

"Of course, he's desperately in love with Diana."

"Yes, but except that?"

"Oh, he *writes*, you know—and he's a barrister. Diana says he could do anything if he tried—be Lord Chancellor, and all that. He's going into Parliament as soon as Diana can find him a constituency."

"Why does Diana worry about him?"

"Oh, she's so wonderful. Who can explain her?"

"She *is* wonderful," said Lady Sybil fervently. "Look at her now. Did you ever see such a perfectly glorious attitude?" And these two loyal adherents went across the room to where Diana sat enthroned upon a sofa, with several male guests standing in front of her. "Don't

move, Diana. You are perfect, like that. We don't want to interrupt. We only want to listen. Oh, please don't move!"

But Diana had changed her attitude, and she rose, smiling.

She was a tall, slim girl, with dark hair and a small oval face—the oval that narrows to a pointed chin. She carried herself grandly, but was always graceful. Only in photographs and pictures of her did you notice the beautiful features: in life you noticed nothing particularly, but merely felt the charm. There was, of course, an individual character in all that concerned her—the way she dressed, the way she did her hair, the way she glanced at you and glanced away from you, the lift of her eyebrows, the corners of her mouth; but it all blended and became merely material of the whole spell, which was itself quite unanalysable.

To Bryan Vaile she was glamour and spell incarnate—no, not quite incarnate, because she realised his dreams so completely that he always had a sensation of dreaming when with her. She summed up everything—his love of poetry; his boyish craving for the princess, the goddess, the unattainable joy. She was music to him, mystery, moonlight on woodland pools—everything. And she let him like her. She liked him. She sought him, just as he sought her—only much more successfully.

After sitting by her side at a polo match, after walking or riding with her, after being with her at night and dancing with her, after kissing her, he was like a mortal emptied and exhausted by divine excesses. He was not an ordinary young man going home to bed—he had fallen from Olympian heights, and he staggered dizzily through this ugly town to find a hiding-place. He flung himself down, and lay glowing with memories—remembering, re-

membering the colour of her, the light of her; repeating to himself the things she had said; hearing her voice—going over the lovely dream from which he had awakened. And she loved him. She had said so. The dream and life were to blend into one.

In the morning he was stung to life and vigour by the longing to be with her again, the necessity of being with her again.

She had told him to get a telephone installed at the Maddox Street flat.

"Why haven't you got one already, you great big stupid?"

"I haven't wanted one," he pleaded, apologetically. "My step-mother rather wanted not to have one."

"But you want one now," said Diana. "*I want one—to talk to you. To tell you when we can meet.*"

He got the telephone, and it became a magic instrument. She used to speak to him on the telephone sometimes quite early in the morning. Her voice then was as fresh and clear as the dawn itself, and while he listened he thought of her standing with sandalled feet among daffodils, by the side of a woodland spring, with the first sunbeams touching her bare arms and neck. "Good-bye, Bryan. Three o'clock. Don't forget;" and she laughed, and her laughter was like the sound of water breaking upon smooth stones and rippling into silence as it flowed on. When she spoke to him late at night it was mystery, wonderment, glamour. "Bryan, I am so tired. Good-night, dear. I shall be riding at eight o'clock. Come, if you like." And he heard her give a little sigh that was like a breath of air in the foliage of the dark grove where she was lying down to rest. She had been dancing all night at a house to which he could not follow her. Other men had clasped her waist, touched her slender fingers.

and intoxicated themselves in the ineffable spell—but it did not matter. He felt no torment of jealousy. All could admire her, worship her, but only one could understand her. Great lords and princes counted for nothing at the shrine of his goddess; they had nothing to give that was of any value to her who could give immortal bliss.

At odd hours, once or twice when she was going from one evening party to another, she herself came to the flat. He had some scruples about letting her do this; but she laughed at his folly, and he was well content to laugh at it, too. She was quite emancipated, in the sense of defying conventions of the old-fashioned sort: no laws could bind her, since obviously she was above all law.

Throughout the glorious summer weather his delight was deepening. They rode together on many mornings; he stayed at the same house with her for two week-end parties; they were with each other as often and as much as possible. Because of her, Hyde Park was a fairyland that he had never seen till then, London became a city of fantastic loveliness and the Thames an enchanted stream. Wherever they were, she brought glamour with her. Just to be near her, and see her, if he might not speak to her, made him glow and throb with happiness. He was often silent when he could have spoken, because the smallest of her actions, every swift change of her expression, so fascinated him that it deprived him of ready words. She was like nobody else on earth—like nobody who had ever been on earth, except for a brief space thousands of years ago. She was different from common mortals even when eating—with her, that ugly act was a joy to watch. She ate very little, seeming to eat only clean and pretty things—white rolls of bread, and fruit—just what a goddess might eat. When he was exiled from her pres-

ence altogether he felt utterly lost as well as lonely and miserable. He thought then not only of her glamour, but of her elusiveness. The whole thing was a dream really: she was the goddess that one cannot hold and possess.

Certainly not a clumsy uninteresting wretch of thirty-four. He was preposterously too old for her. He told her so, and she said "Not a little bit;" but she conveyed to him that of course he *was* rather old to have done so little, and let him understand that henceforth he must do a very great deal. He felt himself how all his life he had been wasting time—or, rather, waiting for this. That was it truly. He had been waiting for the dream to become reality. Now he would achieve wonders. How could he fail?

His doubts and self-questionings ceased when he could hear her voice and touch her hand. It was all gloriously true. They were secretly engaged to each other—he had the right to think of her as his future wife. Some day, before long, he would be telling her father and asking his consent to their marriage. Diana would tell him when to do it. Obviously some preparation of Sir Gerald would be needed, for just at present Sir Gerald was not able to differentiate Bryan from a very considerable number of other tall, clean-shaven men who nodded to him in the street and whose names he wished he could remember.

One afternoon towards the end of July he came back from the Temple to meet her at the flat. She had been out of London for four days that had seemed to him four years; he was in a fever to see her; and he felt worried because soon now she might be going away on a long round of visits, and they had made no definite plans either for the near or the more remote future. There had been talk of her going to Homburg with her father; and that

was what he had wanted her to do, for then he could have gone there too, but this scheme had fallen through. They would discuss what might be possible to-day. She had said in her note that she wished to have a quiet talk, and that he was to expect her at six o'clock or a little later.

He left his chambers before five and walked to Maddox Street to fill in time, and all the way he was thinking of her, pining for her. At a shop in Regent Street he bought as many roses as he could carry.

It was a small flat on the first floor; and from the window of the drawing-room you could see Bond Street all full of life and movement, with the roadway shining like glass in the sunlight, fine carriages, electric broughams, and every now and then a horrid, noisy, petrol-driven automobile, flashing past. Out of the crowd, round that corner, she was coming in half an hour, or, say, in three-quarters of an hour, or an hour at the very worst. He used to think it was a horrid little flat, but he loved it now for all the wonderful service it had done him.

While arranging his roses, he wished that the room looked a little less atrociously unworthy of its visitor. Mrs. Vaile, as a person who spent most of her life in hotels and hired houses, had not any keen sense of the home beautiful; and during her absence even the ordinary decencies of ornament had been carefully packed away. The pretty chintz covers had been stripped from commonplace sofas and chairs; the piano was as bare as a piano in a shop; and there was nothing on the chimney-piece except one large sham Sèvres clock. Four tall mirrors on the walls and a broad one behind the clock reflected this emptiness and uninterestingness, and showed Bryan strong platoons of himself looking excited, anxious, and rather foolish.

He thought of the room as it had been on wonderful nights, with all the electric light turned on, and the mirrors showing him his exquisite gracious love, cloaked to the neck in some fairy wrap, her shining hair like a crown, her eyes soft and glowing, she herself so delicately beautiful that he scarcely dared to hold her in his arms. Thus she had come and gone—his own Diana, filling him with comfort and joy. Ten minutes stolen from the noisy, stupid world to make him deliriously glad.

He sat in the window waiting for her, thinking of her. He was saturated with thought of her; she had made him so entirely hers that there was not a corner of his mind that did not belong to her. She lit up the dull store of his legal knowledge; she coloured his furthest memories of boyhood; she danced like rainbow fire through every imagination or invention of tales that he had meant one day to write. When, as now, he was waiting for her, she not only filled his thought, but made him feel as if any other kind of thought would forever be impossible.

It was terrible to be kept waiting. It enervated, it destroyed him. At six o'clock he had opened the door of the tiny hall. At five minutes past six he had gone downstairs to make sure that the outer door was open. It always was open, but he had to be certain. After six-fifteen he could not keep still. When the Sèvres clock chimed the half-hour he started as if a gun had been fired, and then sank upon the sofa, clenching his fists in despair. She was not coming at all—something had prevented her. She had not returned to London—he would not see her to-day, perhaps not to-morrow. Next moment he heard her footstep on the stairs.

"Now, you old Bryan," she said, smiling, "you are to

be very sensible to-day. No, don't kiss me—not yet—not till we have talked and talked. Come and sit down, like a good boy."

He obeyed her meekly, and they sat side by side on the sofa near the window. She was dressed in black, with one of the coloured gauze scarfs that she always wore, and she let him take her hands and pull off the loose, soft gloves while she talked to him. He hardly listened at first; his heart was beating fast in happiness because she was here, because she had not failed him after all, and yet she seemed to him a little strange, a little different from the Diana he had expected.

"Now please attend carefully, Bryan. What is it you say to inattentive judges when you're holding forth in court? Have I your lordship's ear? Well, I want to submit certain arguments— But I had better say at once that I am going away the day after to-morrow, and this must be good-bye!"

"Where are you going?"

"To Switzerland."

"With Sir Gerald?"

"No, with Violet Kingsland."

"Who else?"

"Her father and mother—and the Ashburys—quite a large party."

"But a party not large enough to include me?"

"No, dear, it's all their own family—and old Lord Kirkstead isn't really well. We shall move about quietly—you know, with servants, and a nurse, and tons of luggage—and perhaps a Bath chair—and the courier trying to stop the train for Violet to sketch mountains or take snap-shots of a waterfall. So, in any case, I could not have managed to work you into the plot."

"And how long will Switzerland last?"

"Oh, till September—and then we shall go down to the Italian lakes."

"And after Italy?"

"I may go to friends in Paris—or perhaps go to Scotland."

"Diana! When *do* I come into the plot? When *am* I to see you again?"

"Bryan, dear." She had released her hands and put them one on each of his shoulders, and she looked into his eyes. "You are not to see me again for ever and ever so long. Bryan, dear, this is good-bye."

"I don't quite understand that," he said dully.

"But you must understand."

"What you said is nonsense." His face flushed, and he was going to take her in his arms, but she moved her hands and gently pushed him from her.

"Bryan, listen. It's not the least little bit of good for us to try and go on with it. It's hopeless—it's madness; and of course we ought never to have begun it. But we now have to talk very sadly and very sensibly—just as if we were two ordinary people, and not the people it was so lovely to think we were. Bryan, I haven't any money. *You* haven't any money."

He got up, went across to the fireplace, and stood there, with his hands in his pockets, looking at her. Behind his back the ugly Sèvres clock was ticking slowly. He had glanced at its dial and seen that it marked the time as twenty-five minutes to seven—she had been here five minutes, but a lot had happened in a little while.

"I haven't any money," he said; "not any money worth speaking of. But I have as much money to-day as I had yesterday, or the day before. Besides, I can make money."

"Yes, but not quick enough. I can't wait. . . . Come

back, and talk about it quietly. . . . Bryan, I am dreadfully sorry—but it can't be helped." Then she stood up, tall, slender, graceful, stretching her arms toward him appealingly.

He went to her, and in a moment she became what she had been—his own Diana, like no other girl that he had ever seen or heard of, unless in dreams; giving him quick, light kisses with lips like rose-leaves, as they seemed to him, fluttering, evanescent, unseizable, like herself; touching him with her fingers as children touch one, fingering his face and eyebrows; smiling; and speaking with such rapidity that one could scarcely follow the words, in a sort of baby language that she had invented for herself. "Yes, I love you very, very much indeed. I have proved it to you in a thousand and a thousand ways. But I have to think for you as well as for myself. What is it you want? . . . Yes, I'll sit nearer to you—quite near—like this. It's for the last time. I'll do almost anything for you, but I can't marry you. How can I? If you think sensibly for one tiniest little possible instant you'll see it's a million and a million miles out of the question. You know, it isn't as if you were famous—even. You will be some day. You ought to be. But, my darling, I can't wait—I simply can't wait." She had never called him her darling before, and the word gave him infinite bliss and infinite pain. "Oh, if you had made a real success already—oh, then it might be different. I should be very, very proud of you, and, oh, how I would shove you along! Push a boy baby to the tree-top;" and she talked in her adorable rapid way. Then she was serious. "You know, you will get on if you believe in yourself. But you don't believe in yourself nearly enough."

"You mean *you* don't believe in me enough."

"No, I mean what I said."

He thought with bitterness, "Of course, she never really cared for me;" and he might have asked her, "If you did not care for me, why have you played with me like this? Why have you done me this great injury, when I never tried to do you any harm?" But pride forbade that kind of question. His pride was lacerated; he was torn to pieces; but, above all, the loss of her was so terrible, the longing for her so immense.

He pulled himself together and asked the obvious, admissible question.

"Who are you chucking me for? Who is to be the happy man?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know."

He laughed. "Another compliment! Anybody except me!"

"No, don't be silly. I think, I think, I very much think it will be Geoffrey Coniston. Or it might be Sedgefield. *He* doesn't know at all yet that he may be required for the advancement in life of a young person with expensive self-indulgent tastes and a fatally accurate knowledge of the world." And then her smile flickered out and tenderness sounded in her voice. "Dear boy, don't be silly. Don't think I wouldn't rather it be you. You have made me feel more than I have felt for any one. Haven't I proved it? Aren't I not proving it now? No man lives who can say I have paid him afternoon calls—and evening calls. And I give no one on earth little, little, hurried kisses—like these"; and he saw tears in her eyes.

At sight of her wet eyelashes he strained her to him, pressing her close. "No, I won't let you go. It's rot. I'll hold you against all the world."

"No, stop. Be good—let me go." She disengaged herself, and her eyes flashed. "I should hate you if you tried to do that. No, it's not rot, it's wisdom"; and she melted again. "Bryan, dear, I am sorry."

Then she stood looking down at him.

"I must go. Don't come out with me—please. I know the stairs—I know the way to Bruton Street. Bryan?"

He remained silent. It was all over. Why go on talking?

"Now, Bryan, you are not to regret me. I'm not worth it. I'm a worthless, abject, hateful person, really. All our people are. Aunt Adelaide—but you didn't know her. My mother—my mother's dead. Good-bye. Do you want to kiss me for the last time?"

"No," he said quietly. "I never want to see you again."

She looked back at him from the doorway, kissed the tips of her fingers, and was gone.

It was the end of the world to him—the end of the dream that makes life worth living. She took away with her all the beauty, the glamour, the music and poetry of life.

II

LONDON had become hateful. England, with its over-prosperity, its false standards, and its insatiable greed, was rotten to the core. Only money counted. A longing came to him for the wider life of new countries; for lands where men are still merely men, where the struggle with nature keeps them strong and fearless, where they have to fight with wild beasts, to hunt and kill for their daily food, to build houses with their own hands, and where, if they fail in these essential things, they swiftly perish and disappear. He thought he would go to the Antipodes, and sleep on the ground, wrapt in a blanket, with a gun by his side and the Southern Cross over his head.

But, instead of doing so, he went to Bournemouth to stay with his step-mother. She wanted him; and she said he should have a room to himself, in which he could get on with his literary work undisturbed. After all, when you are miserable, it does not much matter where you go to hide your misery.

Sitting in the Pullman car of the Bournemouth express, and watching the tamely pretty landscape as it glided past, he thought of himself with self-pity. Diana had said, "You don't believe in yourself." Yet he knew that he was not a bad sort really: all that he wanted was something at once firm and fine to lift him and guide him. He had a few good qualities—he could sympathise with other people; he was industrious, not dreading work, but liking it; and he was neither greedy nor envious. He could admire what is high and good, in life as well as in

art. He had a certain quickness of imagination; but his cleverness—a doubtful quantity—was not solid or far-reaching in character.

With the sense of failure strong upon him, he thought of himself as one who begins adventures but never ends them. If a woman likes a man a little, it is his own fault if he cannot make her like him a lot. That was it—he could not complete anything. He was the kind of a man who, after he has got his adversary beat in a glove-fight, will let himself be knocked out unexpectedly, through his own carelessness. And so it was in everything—unable to *finish*. Deficient follow-through had prevented him from driving a long ball at golf; except this year he had always been beaten at the post in hunt-races; his last words to a jury were always his feeblest; even his famous one-act piece had no proper “curtain.”

Why should a woman care for him? No woman would ever care for him. As well as breaking his heart, Diana had convinced him that he was totally devoid of power over the whole of her sex. Girls may consent to play the fool with such a man, but they don't really fall in love with him.

His step-mother had a comfortable house with a large garden, among the pine-trees on the east cliff, and she seemed glad to see him.

“You look in robust health, Bryan. How are you?”

“Oh, I'm all right,” he said stoutly. “What's more important, how are you?”

“I have been better and I have been worse. But, on the whole, Bournemouth has done wonders for me.”

Mrs. Vaile was an imaginary invalid of so hardened a type that she did not even trouble to invent the ailments from which she was supposed to be suffering. She said, “For many years I have been obliged to take the greatest.

care of myself—otherwise I should not be here now”; or, “You know, as well as I do, that I dare not face the east wind.” And she left it at that. She was one of those thin, elegant, straight-nosed women who miss being pretty when young, and gain a distinguished air as they advance in years; she spoke in rather a plaintive voice, and her manner was always languid except when she was playing cards; she took likes and dislikes in social intercourse; and she had an astoundingly reckless tongue. She said dreadful things about anyone with whom she quarrelled, and at various times there had been threats of actions for slander and other worries for the settlement of which Bryan had been called in as a lawyer, a step-son, and a man of the world. No matter what she had said, she would never withdraw the words or apologise for them; but if hard-pushed she would run away. Her absence from London throughout the season had been caused by a little tiff and subsequent unpleasantness at her favourite bridge club.

People said that she was worldly and selfish, but she had always been as kind to Bryan as she could be without putting herself to any inconvenience. Indeed, he probably owed to her forbearance or generosity the few poor hundreds a year that he possessed; for there had been something doubtful in his father’s will, and the widow, if grasping, might perhaps have cut him out of his small provision. She was well-off herself.

Wherever she happened to be situated she always had staying with her a nondescript girl visitor, of whom she was inclined to make a slave. She had one now.

“Bryan, let me introduce you to Miss Gresley, who has been good enough to take pity on my dulness. . . . Mabel, will you, like an angel, write two or three notes for me after luncheon, before we go for our drive?”

Mrs. Vaile's afternoon drive was an old-established custom, and, wherever she might be, she seemed able to produce exactly the same carriage. Bryan, looking at it to-day, remembered to have seen it at Brighton, at Torquay, and a dozen other places, even as far away as Cannes and Mentone. It was the first-class livery-stable equipage that has no country and defies time—a highly-varnished landau with frayed india-rubber tyres; two large insipid horses, looking sleepily apologetic because they are badly groomed and smell of the yard; and a small coachman who sits bolt upright in the middle of the box-seat, with a hat a shade too small for him, a livery coat, crestless buttons, and a blue cloth rug tightly swathing his legs, and saying, "Never mind what I conceal. It isn't boots and breeches; nor it isn't trousers with a stripe down the sides; but it's all right so long as it's kept out of sight."

Bryan remembered, too, how often he had seen the ceremony of departure—the appearance of a maid with rugs and cushions; then a man-servant with a hot-water bottle or a footstool; then a friend with books for the circulating library, supply of visiting cards, small address book, and so on; and finally his step-mother with a lace handkerchief in her hand. Not a detail had been changed; he saw it all again now. Mrs. Vaile went down the gravel drive for a little way, and, standing by herself, solemnly held the handkerchief aloft. All was well to-day; the handkerchief hung limp, without a flutter, in the warm sunlit air; there was no wind from the east or any other quarter of the compass.

"Richards," she said, "take us for a nice round." She always knew the name of her coachman.

Then they took their seats in the carriage, the horses roused themselves with a grunt that was like a sigh, and

trotted sedately away—out through the pines, among the trim gardens and well-painted houses; down little slopes between rows of villas; through a broad street full of shops and holiday-makers; along a road with trams and immense iron standards; past recreation grounds where flocks of children and nursemaids wandered aimlessly about the lawns. The sun was shining; a band played upon the pier; the sea was calm, with overloaded rowing-boats close to the crowd upon the sands, and an excursion steamer slowly approaching. Heavens, how vapid and tame life can be!

Mrs. Vaile said there were many pleasant people at Bournemouth, both among the residents and the regular visitors, and she had experienced no difficulty in getting a rubber of bridge. People came and played at her house of an evening. Everybody had been kind and indulgent to her—with one exception. The vicar of St. Timothy's and his wife had behaved abominably, and she had told them what she thought of them. This Mr. Denton had not only refused to move one of his permanent seat-holders in order to give her the only place where she would have been out of the draught, but Mrs. Denton had spoken rudely in announcing the refusal. Rudeness she could not forgive.

It chanced that before the drive was over they saw the offending couple.

"There he goes," said Mrs. Vaile, "with his wife—if she *is* his wife."

Bryan smiled for the first time since his disaster.

"Surely you don't mean to insinuate that a venerable old gentleman—"

"I'd believe *anything* about him, after the manner in which he has treated me. But, of course," she added languidly, "I don't care whether he has married the

woman or not. She was his cook, to begin with, I suppose."

Miss Gresley took very little part in the conversation. She seemed to be a repressed sort of girl, probably about twenty-three or twenty-four, and she glanced at Bryan shyly while he talked to his step-mother. He noticed that she had brown eyes and that her veil was neatly tied under her chin.

After dinner a card-table was set out in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Vaile bemoaned the fact that nobody was coming this evening to make up a rubber.

"Of course," she said, "we might try to play dummy, if you'd care about it. Mabel, I must confess, is not a great performer."

But Miss Gresley protested that she scarcely knew the rules of bridge, and Bryan also excused himself.

"Very well. Then it must be patience. Mabel, do you mind getting me the patience box? . . . There were two such nice young people staying at the Bath Hotel all last week—Tarbord by name—a young guardsman and his bride, on their honeymoon—boring each other to extinction." While she spoke, Mrs. Vaile poured out five or six packs of small cards and shuffled them in all directions over the table. "Well, they came in, two evenings, for a friendly game of poker."

Bryan smiled again.

"I know your friendly games of poker. After that, were the honey-mooners able to pay their hotel bill?"

"No, you wrong me, Bryan. Mr. Tarbord was certainly a *gift*, but the bride had quite a good idea of the game. There were five of us altogether," and she sighed plaintively; "the ideal number for poker. It was very enjoyable. . . . Now, to business." And she became immersed in a complicated patience.

It proved refractory as well as complicated, but Mrs. Vaile continued to tackle it without flinching, and never lifted her eyes from the table. "I am in great trouble," she murmured from time to time.

When Miss Gresley, standing behind her chair, made a suggestion, she said, "Please don't interrupt"; and when Bryan walked about the room, she said, "Please don't fidget."

When he began walking about again, she said, "What's the matter with you?"

"Might I open this other window?" he asked.

"No, certainly not. I don't want to be blown out of my chair. But do go out for a stroll—and take Mabel with you. Don't bother about me. This may keep me all night—but I'm not going to be beaten."

Miss Gresley jumped at the chance of getting out of doors, and presently she and Bryan were walking side by side on the path above the cliff.

It was a beautiful summer night, a fringe of white foam just perceptible where the sea broke noiselessly upon the sands, and a perfume of the pines in the soft air. Innumerable lamps still showed upon the pier, and an untiring band sent faint music far out into the darkness across the water. All the tourists and holiday-makers were on the pier or about the town; the east cliff was a pleasant solitude.

And Bryan opened his heart to this chance companion and told her that he was miserable. He did not of course say that he had been jilted by his lady-love; but he said that at thirty-four he had no further use for life, because he had found it a vast and continuous disillusionment. He believed in nothing; he hoped for nothing. He was lonely and unhappy, and he never expected to be anything else.

It was utterly unlike him to talk about himself; but the egoism bred of his catastrophe possessed him as a disease, and he felt an imperious need to describe his lamentable sensations to someone—even to this stranger. The mere sound of the words did him good. Moreover, Miss Gresley proved herself to be sympathetic and intelligent, a good listener. Certainly she could sympathise with what he said as to the sense of loneliness, since it was a trouble that she had known well for the better part of her existence.

When she went to bed she could not sleep for a long time because of thinking about Mrs. Vaile's handsome, enigmatically sad step-son. He seemed to her mysterious and very interesting, the kind of a man one reads of in books; not too young, about thirty-four, with strong, clear-cut features and a rare smile that redeems the sternness. She thought his face was rather like the face of that knight in the picture, who with his sword cuts the bonds of a maiden that miscreants have tied to a tree. In the picture the knight is freeing the girl without looking at her, so that she need not feel ashamed. The picture was called "Chivalry."

The sitting-room that had been specially allotted to his use was on the ground floor, with French windows opening into the garden; and the garden looked pretty enough in the morning light. High walls of rhododendrons screened it from the prying eyes of neighbours; ilex trees threw dark shadows upon the lawns, and by contrast made the colours of flowers in sunlit beds and borders more intensely vivid; and at the far end there was a white, square-backed seat that invited one to come out and be lazy.

In order to occupy himself he had begun to sketch a play of modern life, jotting down dialogue, or, rather, making notes of long speeches; for the theme lent itself to harangue and diatribe. It was to be a terrible, scathing indictment of the other sex, and he proposed fairly to let himself go. It was all vague; but the idea would be to show how men waste their highest gifts on women without winning them, when, if they took them by the neck, shook them, and beat them, they might make slaves of them. Nancy was fonder of Bill Sykes than Sarah Jennings was of the Duke of Marlborough. That was the idea—if you want a woman, buy her with money or take her by force. There are no middle ways. He would have liked to do a scene in which a man pelted his unfaithful mistress with gold coins, beating her down to her knees with a hail of little golden blows, saying, "Money is all you care for. Then take it. Take some more." But, unfortunately, Alexandre Dumas had done that scene, so he would have to think of another method of conveying the same idea. Even while planning it he knew that his play was rubbish, and that he would not finish it; he knew that he would never finish anything—knew that he was done for.

Quite early on this first working morning Miss Gresley challenged him to play lawn-tennis, and he immediately threw down his pen and went upstairs to put on flannels. He felt a little ashamed of himself for having let loose that astounding burst of autobiography, and he wanted to wipe out any impression of wonder that it might have left on her mind. She took him to a club ground close by, where the courts were in excellent order, and they had some rousing good sets. She was a fine big girl—with brown eyes and brown hair—a jolly, matter-

of-fact creature—who played tennis quite well and thoroughly enjoyed it. The exercise gave him an appetite for luncheon.

He was sure now of a game of tennis if he wanted it, and Miss Gresley was as a rule available if he cared to take a saunter in the town or see the mob on the pier. His step-mother let him off the afternoon drives, and he could go for long solitary walks by himself. He had his room—a stronghold into which he could retire to work, or sadly muse, or take a nap and for a little while forget the cause of sadness. Mrs. Vaile liked having him there, wished him to make a long visit, and he said he would stay three weeks or possibly a month.

He was rarely bored by being made prisoner at cards, for on most nights Mrs. Vaile succeeded in collecting her own quorum, and he and Mabel Gresley were free to sit on the garden seat or wander upon the cliff enjoying the pleasant air. They used to come to the lighted windows of the house and look at the absorbed card-players—so silent, so eager, so entirely satisfied with the eternally repeated amusement. There was a bald-headed colonel, nagged at by Mrs. Vaile between all the deals, who always wanted his revenge, however late it might be.

So the long, empty days passed by.

Miss Gresley relieved the all-enveloping dulness and flatness of the place by providing something to look at and to talk to. She even aroused mild interest and easily-answered conjecture. She was a healthy girl, with pretty hair and a good complexion, and by the expression of her face you could read all her thoughts. They were not intricate. When puzzled by any subtlety of language she looked very serious, with a little frown and a droop of the lip; then the frown relaxed and there came a frank broad smile. "Oh! you are laughing at me, Mr. Vaile.

You didn't really mean what you said." It amused him to make her look like that, and he enjoyed shocking her by the violence of his opinions—tirades against England, the Empire, the Church, anything. He felt what he said for the first day or two, but after that he spoke in this manner on purpose.

She was very simple, of course, totally different from the girls of that great world that he had recently frequented; but she was sensible, and her naïve turns of speech sounded like an echo of early Victorian conversation and were not without a kind of charm to ears weary of the imitative tricks of modern fashionable chatter.

"Oh, Mr. Vaile, you don't mean that. You *can't* mean it."

She said, too, "I was afraid of you at first."

"Why?" he asked, smiling.

"Because you are so awfully clever."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, one must be clever to succeed at the bar."

"I haven't succeeded."

"Oh, but you *have*. Mrs. Vaile says so. And to write as you do."

"How do you know how I write?"

"I read your story in the *Windsor Magazine*, and it's lovely. Why don't you write novels?"

"I couldn't."

"Of course you could—just as well as anybody else."

That was a refreshing touch. "Just as well as anybody else!" No effort at analytical criticism or affectation of cultured fastidiousness about *that*!

In her knock-about morning costume—Panama straw hat, white skirt, and one of those long Jersey things of violet colour—she looked quite smart. As she stood in the sunshine before the house, taking a snap-shot of him

with her kodak, he studied her appearance critically and approvingly. He liked her brown stockings and neat shoes, and the single pearls in her ears; although substantially built, she had no clumsiness or lack of ease in her movements; she was really a decent-looking girl. That repressed manner had gone; shyness had made her seem a little awkward in the beginning, but now that it had been banished by increasing intimacy she met one's eyes with a frank outlook and an untroubled smile. The heightened animation greatly improved her face, and at times she looked almost pretty.

"Now let me photograph you," he said politely.

"Oh, no. I don't want my portrait, thank you."

"But I should like it. Please let me. I must have a souvenir of my antagonist at tennis and my accomplice in dodging the bridge-table."

Then he took snap-shots of her, and she promised to get them developed and printed in due course.

One of the subjects on which he drew her out was the "Rights of Women" movement. She was a firm, if not active, supporter of the great cause; and when he spoke violently against it, attacking the whole sex, using up some of his notes for a crescendo of denunciation, she said, sadly and sagely, "If you only believe half of it, I'm afraid it means that you have known some very bad women."

And the same evening, when they sat together in the garden, she told him a little about her own life and its loneliness; of how from time to time she had been forced to work for a living; and all about the other girls and women, known to her, who supported themselves entirely, without any help from friends or relations. When you had once worked in that way, you understood the feelings and needs of all the thousands of factory-girls,

and so on. She said that men, as employers, were often brutally cruel. And when they were kind, it was worse. They never treated women properly. "That's why I am for the suffrage. *I don't want a vote. My friends don't want votes. But women ought to have them.*"

Her own tale was more interesting to him than all this stale argument as to votes for women, and he questioned her, making her tell him everything of herself. It seemed that she had been rather kicked about by the world; always hard up, although with some small expectations that she never allowed herself to think of; always left in her own guardianship; not particularly wanted by anybody—even so long ago as when she was at school, not having a settled home or any place in which she could be sure of a welcome for the holidays. She had a father who was a great dear, but of no use to anybody, not even to himself. And she had heaps of relations—cousins, aunts, and great-aunts—of whom she was very fond, but upon whom she could not hang as an encumbrance. Of course, she had met with much kindness from friends, and they had given her many treats—such as this one, for instance, her visit to Mrs. Vaile. It was extraordinarily kind of Mrs. Vaile, having her here to stay like this.

She told him her story reluctantly, but by questioning he made her tell it all, and, although perhaps moved by memories and regrets, she spoke stoutly, not in any way putting herself forward as a martyr. While he listened he felt pity, thinking, "Here it is again. Money. This girl is good, kind, self-reliant, a lady; but, just because of the unequal division of wealth, she is neglected, repressed, put upon by all the world. The cursed unfairness of it! She has just as much right to the gaiety, the brightness, and the joy of life as the other girls who happen to have rich parents to take care of them." And he

spoke with real sympathy in his voice. "What rough luck! What rough luck!" He had taken her hand, and was gently caressing it. "Poor little Mabel. Never mind, you'll have a good time some day, Mabel."

Next day he talked of her to his step-mother. Mrs. Vaile said she knew some of her cousins, people who lived in Wales, not far from Llandrindod.

"I met Mabel herself at Mentone. She was doing companion to a consumptive girl—a Miss Gaunt or Grange; and I cannot remember if I ever heard whether she died in the end or not. I must ask Mabel. I am sure Mabel did all she could to keep her alive. I noticed at once how capable she was. Yes, I am very fond of Mabel Gresley, and she has been most useful to me more than once. But it is a little tiresome and stupid of her not to have learnt bridge. She places herself at a disadvantage."

"Perhaps she can't afford to play bridge."

"If she played properly, it would cost her nothing. And if she played really well, it might be of the greatest assistance to her—quite apart from the pleasure."

That evening there was moonlight on the wet sands and the fringe of sea-foam. Bryan and his companion walked in the direction of Boscombe, and, returning, found a seat halfway down the cliff on one of the zig-zag paths. Voices sounded over their heads from time to time as men and girls passed slowly along the cliff top, and then all was silent again except for the gentle murmur of the sea.

"Mabel," he asked abruptly, "are you fond of moonlight? Does moonlight stir old instincts in you—does it make you feel that ancestors of ours a million years ago were guided by it when they came creeping out of their caves to stalk, and chase, and slay their victims?"

She looked at him, but did not answer.

"Mabel, I asked you if you are fond of moonlight."

Still she did not answer.

"Do you mind my calling you Mabel? I can call you Mabel?"

She was embarrassed, and her distress amused him.

"No," she said at last, flatly, "of course you can't."

"Why can't I, Mabel? Of course I can. And you must call me Bryan."

She got up from the seat. "Shall we go back now?"

"No," and he took her hand, and would not let her draw it away. "You mustn't go back yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I say not. Sit down."

The sting of Diana was in his blood, making him take pleasure in compelling her to do what she was told. And after this he forced her to kiss him.

Taking her in his arms almost roughly, scarcely knowing what he did, behaving like one of the characters in his unwritten play, he kissed her himself, and told her to kiss him.

"Do it properly. I won't let you go until you do. And call me Bryan."

She struggled, but he held her in spite of her efforts.

"You'll make me hate you"; and she was breathing fast. "Yes, I hate you, to-night."

"Oh, don't do that. I am not worth hating."

"You—you're horrid to me. Oh, please let me go . . . Bryan!" And suddenly she kissed him.

He released her at once, and laughed. "That's right."

She hid her face with her hands, shivered, and then shook her shoulders—as if something terrific had occurred; and all the way back to the house she would not say a word. Perhaps she had never kissed a man before. She was very simple.

He did not kiss her again for two nights; and when he did she made no resistance, just giving her face to his.

She talked freely and contentedly, and always when they were out together now she called him Bryan; but she blushed sometimes when he looked at her across the dinner-table, as though there was a guilty secret between them.

August was drawing to an end; he had been at Bournemouth over three weeks; it was time for him to go; and something that Mabel Gresley said to him one morning, in an expansive talk after a game of tennis, made him feel that it was time to go at once. The more he thought of this little conversation the more uncomfortable he became. Quite unconsciously, just by a few words, she had shown him the danger of a most tremendous misunderstanding. Or so it seemed to him—perhaps he was alarming himself quite unnecessarily. Anyhow, it was his plain duty to avoid the chance of such a mistake. He would be off to-morrow morning.

During the course of dinner he announced that he was obliged to set out for Paris, thanking his step-mother, expressing regret at leaving her, and saying how much he had enjoyed himself. He had a sensation that he made this announcement with too much abruptness, and that his voice sounded constrained, not quite natural; but Mrs. Vaile noticed nothing wrong.

"I am sorry you are going," she said placidly. "We shall miss you. Paris, too! You'll find it very hot, I fear. When Paris is hot, well, it's simply unbearable. I was completely prostrated there one summer—with your father—at the Bristol Hotel—on our way through. He could not move me for three days; and I was a week at

Boulogne before I revived sufficiently to face the crossing."

He glanced at Mabel Gresley. She was looking at him earnestly and inquiringly; her lip trembled.

After dinner she asked him to come into the garden, and directly they were by themselves she spoke eagerly and anxiously.

"Bryan, are you in trouble? Do tell me."

"In trouble? No—not a bit."

"But something has happened? You have had bad news?"

"No, no."

"Then why are you going so suddenly?"

"Well, I have been here a long time, you know."

"Do trust me," and she stretched out her hand towards him. "As soon as you spoke I felt certain that some sort of trouble—or worry—something serious—was on your mind. And I am so sorry—Bryan."

He took her hand, patted it, and gently relinquished it.

"I assure you, you are quite wrong, Mabel. I don't know what made you think it."

"Because you spoke so strangely—so suddenly."

"Did I? If I did, it meant nothing."

"On your honour?"

"Yes, on my honour."

They strolled side by side, beneath the dark ilex trees and past the still fragrant flowers, and when they reached the bench at the bottom of the garden she sat down. He stood near her, and lit a cigarette.

"You are going to-morrow quite early?"

"Yes, I want to get through to-morrow, and I have things to do in London."

"You know how sorry I am that you are obliged to go."

Obviously she was sorry — more than sorry; upset about it. He felt very uncomfortable, and began to talk of his own regret, choosing the words carefully.

"I shall always remember this pleasant time. I loved our tennis, and the jolly evenings, and all of it."

"I wish it could have gone on," said Mabel simply. "But I'm not going to be doleful. Oh, do sit down!"

He threw his cigarette away and sat beside her, and she put her hand in his.

"Will you come back here?" she asked; "I mean, this autumn?"

"Oh, no. I shall have to be hard at work. My holiday will be over."

Then she asked him when and how they were to meet again.

He answered lamely, saying that his future plans were uncertain and that in any event he would be busy for a long time.

"Bryan!" She had drawn away from him; and, in her simple, downright way, she asked another question. "Does this mean that you don't want ever to see me again?"

"No, I hope very much that chance may bring us together—in London—or—"

"*Chance!* You aren't going to *try?*"

He was very uncomfortable. It was too dark to see the expression of her face, but she was looking at him, and her voice let him know plainly enough that she was agitated and distressed.

"Of course I will try—if you would really care to see me, Mabel. But is it any good? I am sure it can't be any good."

"Why not any good?"

"I mean, our friendship has been so jolly; we have

been such pals; but, honestly, I am not the sort of person who—who would make a good friend for you, or for anybody.” And he floundered on, feebly and inconsecutively; describing himself as a reckless, useless man who had no fixed aims in life, no hope of ever settling down or being in a position that would justify his occupying the thoughts and the regard of a woman. He was not worth thinking about or making a friend of.

While she listened to this there came from her a sound like a stifled sob, and when he stopped speaking she asked him more questions.

The case being as he said, she wished to know why he had seemed to like her, why he had seemed so anxious to make her like him.

Her questions were unanswerable. He got up from the seat, and stood looking down at her. He was greatly perturbed; he felt confusion and remorse. Why had he done it? With no idea of marriage, certainly with no dishonourable ideas, really with no ideas at all, he had been trifling with her for more than three weeks; drawing her out of herself; leading her on to confide in him, to trust him, to rely on him. He had amused himself at her expense. Just because he had been so knocked out of conceit with himself by Diana, he had almost brutally made love to this other girl—the first girl he could find—in order to soothe the smart of his vanity, rehabilitate his self-esteem, and wipe out the memory of defeat. That was how it all seemed to him now, when called to account for it.

“No, don’t touch me.”

Suddenly she had begun to cry. She turned herself, put her arms on the back of the bench, laid her head upon them, and sobbed and shook in a manner that was dreadful to see.

"Mabel, don't cry. Please don't cry."

But she would not move; she went on crying.

"Mabel, do you mean you are fond of me?"

"No, I'm not," she sobbed. "I was fond of what I thought you were—not of what you really are. . . . You said you were miserable. You weren't as miserable as I was."

Her tears, the tone of her sobbing voice, her bowed head, produced upon him an intensely painful impression. It was something that he would never forget as long as he lived.

"Mabel, I am so dreadfully sorry. What can I do?"

"Leave me—that's all."

He obeyed her, leaving her bowed down, alone in the darkness, weeping as though her heart was broken. He looked back at her from a little distance, peeringly, and stood waiting, but she never moved.

Then he went along the gravel drive, past the lighted windows where the bridge-players sat engrossed by their eternal diversion, out into the roadway, and walked up and down among the pines. When he returned to the house, after some time, he found out from a servant that Miss Gresley had come in from the garden and gone upstairs to her room. She had left a message for Mrs. Vaile to say that she was tired and had gone to bed.

Without waiting for the end of the bridge-party, Bryan soon went to bed himself. He told the servant who looked after him that he wanted his things to be packed as early as possible in the morning, because he had decided to catch the first train; and he walked about the bedroom for a long while, thinking most uncomfortably. His thoughts had concentrated themselves, and they formed now one sharp and tormenting reproach.

He had done to Mabel exactly what Diana did to him.

III

IN EACH succeeding mile of his journey he felt more uncomfortable; the farther he left her behind him the sharper his remorse became. By the time he reached Paris he was too tired to eat, yet not tired enough to sleep; and he lay tossing and turning on a stuffy bed in an airless hotel room, listening to the irritant noises of night traffic on the boulevard, and thinking about the girl whom he had treated with such inexcusable levity.

It had all been serious to her. But to what extent serious? If because of his folly she had allowed herself to become really fond of him, she might suffer enormously; she might feel so much disgust with life— She might commit suicide. Girls do such things. The thought of it filled him with horror.

He remembered all that she had told him about herself. Sadness and loneliness had been her portion; no doubt beneath a cheerful, brave aspect she had often carried an aching heart. Already, before she saw him, she was perhaps tired of fighting the ugliness of life, sick from many disappointments, ready to pass from a state of weariness to a state of despair. A slight blow would then be sufficient to make her seek peace at the extreme price. The possibility of this was terrible to him in the sleepless, suffocating hours of the night. He thought of her simple nature, her direct, downright way of attempting to solve intricate problems; she ignored subtleties, she dealt only with strongly contrasting facts—black and white, yes and no, good and bad, right or wrong; she

would be just the girl to take a tragically final short-cut out of a difficulty.

In the morning much of his nocturnal worry seemed to him fantastic and absurd. She was a thoroughly sensible girl; within a week she would have forgotten him; unless they happened to be brought together she would never waste another thought upon him. And he was not likely to intrude on her, or by his accidental presence revive unpleasant memories; she could at least trust him to keep out of her way. But before the evening he had decided that he must at all hazards see her once more.

He had meant to go on to Biarritz to have a look at the place in the French season that he had always heard was so pleasant; he was not afraid of the heat, and he wanted to get off the beaten track of British tourists; but he could not continue his journey. He wandered up and down the boulevards, sat outside cafés, stood in front of shop windows, in a stupid fashion, as if hypnotised by the glare and noise and crowd; and every minute he was thinking of her. He could not leave the thing in the mess that he had made of it. He must really have one last interview with her, to explain himself, somehow to put a better complexion on regrettable events. Above all else, he must find out that she was all right.

He went straight back to Bournemouth. But Miss Gresley was no longer there; she had left in a hurried, troublesome manner, disregarding remonstrances or entreaties, and Mrs. Vaile was almost prostrated by the effects of this violent departure.

"Did she say why she was going?"

"No. But I guessed, of course. It is you who have upset her. What else could it be?" And Mrs. Vaile reproached him in a manner that for her was angry and severe. "I must say that anything more inconsiderate

has never happened. You see how useful the girl is to me—how necessary here—and, to amuse yourself, you play the fool and drive her away from me. I must say, at your age, one would have expected something different. In my house, at least, she ought to have been sacred." And she conveyed an unpleasant implication, which he at once indignantly repelled.

"She was sacred, she is sacred. Good heavens, you don't pretend to think for a moment—"

"Oh, I don't care what you have meant, or what you haven't meant. The net fact remains. You have robbed me of my companion and left me helplessly stranded."

"What can I do?"

"Go and fetch her back. Reason with her. Point out how thoughtless, how ungrateful, she has been. She came to suit her own convenience."

"But if she won't come back, can't you get anyone else?"

"How can I? I have wired to Sybil Gordon begging her to come."

"Oh, you have?"

"Yes, but is it likely she will be able to come? It is a thousand to one chance. The same applies to Ethel Bovill."

"Oh, you have asked her, too?"

"Of course I have. I am in great trouble—which you don't seem yet to understand. I have had two wretched nights. All the good I have derived here is being undone."

He was back in London by five o'clock that afternoon, and he went immediately to the house at Earl's Court where Mrs. Vaile had said that he would find Mabel. But he did not find her.

"No," said the maid-servant, "Miss Gresley isn't stay-

ing here. She came with her luggage two days ago, intending to stop, I think, but she went away again."

"Can you give me her address?"

"No, sir, I couldn't."

"She is still in London?"

"Oh, yes, sir. She called this morning to see if there were any letters for her."

"Who does live here?"

"Mrs. George Gresley, sir. *She* could give you the address, of course, but she's out."

"When will she be back?"

"Oh, about seven, sir. If you could call again, I'd have the address ready for you."

He filled in the next two hours as best he could by mooning about at the Earl's Court Exhibition, and then presented himself again. Mrs. George Gresley had come home, but the maid-servant had not obtained the address. She said that Mrs. Gresley wished to see him; and he was shown into a dismal library that looked out upon a most melancholy garden at the back of the house, and there kept waiting for what seemed an unconscionably long time. When at last Mrs. Gresley appeared she made him explain who he was and why he was hunting for Mabel.

He said that his special and immediate business was to carry some urgent messages from his step-mother to Miss Gresley.

"Oh, to be sure, yes," said Mrs. Gresley. "Mabel has just come from Mrs. Vaile. Very kind of you to take the trouble," and she laughed good-humouredly. She was a large, full-blown matron, and she now became cordial and talkative. "You'll think it ridiculous of me to be so cautious; but when Calder said a strange gentleman had come asking for Mabel's address, I thought it quite mysterious. I am only too sorry that there was no room

for her here, when she turned up unexpectedly. Or, to be absolutely frank, it wasn't the want of room, but the want of servants—my cook is away on her holidays. And my husband and I are just pigging it till he himself can get away, which will be directly his partner relieves him. Mabel, of course, quite understood. She knows that she is welcome at *any* time, when it is not impossible. I have told her so again and again. . . . Well, then, she has gone to lodgings—Number 10, Sark Street, Kensington—no distance from Kensington High Street. No doubt she goes there to be near her cousins—the Ridgeworths. They have a wee little house on Campden Hill. But you know the Ridgeworths, of course?"

"No, I have not as yet had the pleasure of meeting them."

"Kate Ridgeworth—the elder of the sisters—is in some respects a very remarkable woman. She has started a bonnet shop. Mabel worked there last summer. Well, give her my love. We are all of us devoted to Mabel."

Bryan went away with a very poor opinion of Mrs. Gresley. Why could not she have taken in Mabel and made her comfortable? He thought it was miserably selfish, heartless of her, to make a string of inhospitable excuses, and allow a lonely girl to go away from her door to find shelter in lodgings. He thought, too, how completely this incident tallied with all that Mabel had indicated of neglect in the uncomplaining tale of her life. These stupid relatives did not value her; they did not want her.

It was a poor street for Kensington, and Number 10 was not by any means the best house in the street. A very dirty servant-girl told him that Miss Gresley had gone out. As well as being unwashed, the girl seemed so thick-headed that Bryan asked to see the landlady.

"Miss Gresley," said the landlady, a clean and jovial woman—"Miss Gresley, bless her heart, she has come back to me, and glad I was to see her, and to have her old room vacant for her. Not but what all my rooms are empty—natch'rally, at this time of year."

"Has she gone out for the evening, do you know?"

"Yes, surely. Miss Ridgeworth came and fetched her in her brougham, not ten minutes ago, for the evening out."

"I suppose you don't know where they were going?"

"Theatre or the Exhibition—I couldn't say which. No, that I couldn't say. But stop a minute. They were wearing their hats, and that looks more like the Exhibition. A fine evening, too. I know if I was given the preference to choose which, I should say the Exhibition—better out o' doors than in, a night like this, *I* should say."

Bryan asked the landlady to tell Miss Gresley that he had called, and to say that he would call again to-morrow.

"Then not in the morning, or you won't find her. I know that for certain, from her own remarks."

"I'll come in the afternoon—say three o'clock; and perhaps you will kindly tell her I hope it will be convenient for her to see me."

"I'll tell her the minute she returns. I shan't be gone to bed, and she often gives me a few words last thing at night."

Bryan's heart warmed to the landlady, because she seemed genuinely attached to her lodger; and he felt, too, that this Miss Ridgeworth—the remarkable woman or her sister—must be a good sort, since she was giving Mabel a treat. It was an immense relief to know that Mabel, after all, was going on with life in a quite ordinary manner.

He had some food at an execrable restaurant not far from the District Railway station, and then for the second time to-day he went to the Earl's Court Exhibition. The courts and gardens were still crowded with provincial excursionists, the people who come to take their holiday in London when all Londoners are away; and he walked to and fro, over the little bridges and past the garish wooden scenery, looking for her. There were two bands, one at each end of the grounds, each with a large audience about it, and he went backwards and forwards between them, thinking every time he failed to find her listening to the Royal Horse Artillery that he would be sure to come up with her near the Grenadiers. He saw a dozen girls rather like her, but he did not see her herself. He stayed till both bands played "God Save the King," and then went westward in a cab, feeling tired and disappointed, and thinking of the nights at Bournemouth when they sat side by side, with the cool soft air on their faces and the murmur of the sea in their ears. "Bryan, it is time to go back. . . Bryan, let me go, please—" In imagination he could hear her voice close beside him now, as his cab rattled and swung along the ugly streets.

He had taken a room for himself in Jermyn Street, and before going there he looked in at his club. At the club he was given a telegram, from Mrs. Vaile:

"Ethel Bovill is coming. Do nothing further in the matter."

He had lost his prime excuse for hunting Mabel, but he was none the less anxious and eager for the chase.

His object was attained on the following afternoon. The kind landlady, and not her imbecile maid, opened the door at Number 10, Sark Street, and she said Miss Gresley was at home.

"You'd best step in here. Yes, she'll be down directly;" and he was left to wait in the ground floor sitting-room.

He looked about him with wonder and distress; he had never before been in this sort of house and this sort of room. It was not only that the room was small, dingy, wanting clean paint and new paper, it was so poor and sad, so completely devoid of the cheerful if common adornment of a room in a good lodging-house at a seaside town. Yet, mean as it was, Mabel could not afford to have it for her own. Her room, at the top of the house probably, had to serve her both as sitting-room and bedroom. He understood that it was a kindness on the part of the landlady to allow her to use this best parlour for the reception of her visitor. Poor little Mabel!

"Ah, here you are. Mabel!"

She was dressed in a dark blue frock, and it made her look slimmer; she looked paler, too; and that old air of repression seemed to have returned to her. She shook hands limply, and then sat at the table beneath the ugly gas-chandelier, and glanced up at him inquiringly. Her eyes seemed to him larger, with less light in them, and they had dark circles round them that suggested sleeplessness or fatigue. Her pretty brown hair was arranged a little differently, so that it came lower across her forehead.

"You weren't long in Paris."

"No. I hurried back."

"Why?"

He had not quite known what he would say to her; but now that he saw her there was no difficulty. He asked her to be his wife. He really wanted her to accept the offer. He urged her to say yes, declaring that he would not take no as an answer. Something forlorn about her,

a mute appeal for the care and tenderness that she had never had, stirred him deeply; the pity that is akin to love filled his heart.

But she refused him. She refused firmly and finally. And when he asked her the reason of her refusal, he saw the piteous effort that she made to speak in a light, brisk, business-like tone, and the piteous failure when she tried to smile.

"Why? Oh, it's absurd, of course. You must know very well. You have only asked me because you thought you ought to."

He protested feebly, and she adhered to her flat refusal. He thought that he would feel disappointed; but he didn't. He went away feeling relieved. He had done the right thing, and there was an end of it.

IV

YET it was still not quite over.

Throughout the autumn and for the most of the winter he continued to keep in touch with Mabel, although at first she showed an inclination to avoid him. He cared no longer for his old friends; his few real pals were hard-working, fully-occupied men; the law bored him; his club bored him; everything, including himself, bored him; but he derived a sense of satisfaction from watching over Mabel in a friendly, brotherly, almost a fatherly, way.

She would not go to the play with him alone, but after a lot of persuasion she agreed to make one of a theatre-party comprising the Miss Ridgeworths also, and thus began a series of little treats that he organised for her. He was well content to provide dinners and orchestra stalls for her cousins and anybody else if he could get her thrown into the bargain. She was engaged now upon some kind of secretarial work at a ladies' league, and it worried him to think that she did not obtain sufficient exercise. He wanted her to play lawn-tennis with him at Queen's Club, or golf at Richmond; but he could only make her consent to go for a walk with him now and then on Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Tramping about London was not an ideal form of exercise, but it was better than nothing at all.

Soon he was admitted to a certain extent into Mabel's world, making the acquaintance of more cousins and girl friends, and finding them all amiable, well-bred people who had adopted a bachelor mode of life merely because

the necessity of earning money had forced them out of home circles, and not because of any aggressive revolutionary protest against the condition of women generally. It was a new atmosphere to him, and on the whole he liked it.

The Miss Ridgeworths accepted him in a most friendly fashion, making him free of their jolly little house on Campden Hill, and even allowing him to penetrate the recesses of their bonnet shop. He looked in upon them among the bonnets once or twice between tea-time and dinner-time, because he knew that Mabel had a habit of going there on her way back from the ladies' league.

Miss Kate Ridgeworth was a big, jolly woman of about forty-five, who did gymnastic exercises every night and morning and loved to talk about them; she was very active in spite of her bulk, moving about a room so quickly that one had an impression of a large coloured cloud that passed backwards and forwards through the solid impediments of furniture. Then suddenly she would materialise by sinking into a chair and heaving a most substantial sigh. Miss Jane Ridgeworth was a little younger and thinner, and so active that she never sat down at all. Both sisters had full and yet rather shrill voices, and at their house they kept a parrot and singing birds, as well as Pekinese dogs with bells, which pets, both fur and feather, they encouraged to join in the conversation and add to its shrillness when it became animated.

"How are you, Mr. Vaile? . . . Pretty Poll, pretty Poll, did 'um speak? . . . Toto, Toto, bark a nice 'How-de-do' to the visitor. . . . Augustus, what all dat frenzy mean? . . . Yes, Augustus recognises you, Mr. Vaile. He wants to jump on your knee."

The house was daintily furnished, full of pretty things; but there was a spirit of unrest in it that the Miss Ridgeworths either did not notice or enjoyed. You could not sit reposefully, admiring the nice little drawing-room or finishing a quietly confidential chat. You were always interrupted. The door was always open, and you heard everything that was happening upstairs and downstairs. Beyond the incessant disturbance caused by the dogs and birds, people came in and out, breaking the sequence of one's ideas and carrying one off on trains of useless conjecture.

"Kate, may I borrow your red opera-cloak to-night?" A strange young lady in hat and furs would burst in with such a request. "I'll return it to-morrow, on my sacred."

"My dear girl, of *course*. That is, if Nellie Gardiner hasn't got it. Jane, where's Jane? . . . Pretty Poll. Yes, scream for Jane, Pollie."

Or a breathless and indignant maid-servant came to report that the fishmonger had sent a salmon cutlet not big enough for two persons, much less four. "Stevens says she'd like you to see for yourself before she cooks it that it can't possibly go round among four."

Then the whole house filled with clamour. Both sisters shouted together; the cook yelled up from the basement; the indignant parlour-maid started a conversation with the fishmonger on the telephone in the hall; the dogs and birds nearly went mad because they felt that their mistresses were in trouble and they wished so much to help if anyone would tell them how.

After this alarm Miss Kate Ridgeworth came back to the visitor in the drawing-room and resumed her seat. "*Fishmongers!*" With this one word and a large sigh she dismissed the incident. "What were we talking

about? Oh, yes, Mabel Gresley. You said you thought she looked pale and seedy."

"Yes. Do you think she works too hard at that place?"

"Oh, no, it's just amusement for her. Child's play to our bonnets! No, Mabel's health is all right; but we have all noticed that her spirits aren't as good as they used to be. She has somehow changed—hardened."

"Oh, really?" And Bryan began to talk about something else. That remark of Miss Ridgeworth had made him uncomfortable.

A peculiar attribute of both Miss Ridgeworths was their passion for Bohemian society. It was as though the blamelessly orthodox customers that they had to deal with all day produced a revulsion of feeling and made them long to rub shoulders with some really bad characters. The patrons of the bonnet shop were wicked enough in one sense—for Miss Kate told him they never paid their bills;—but they were not picturesque, like actors, socialists, anarchists, and minor poets.

One Sunday afternoon, quite early in their acquaintance, Miss Kate took him to what she called a "literary party"; and really it was a terrible affair. The host, a small man with a tremendous loud voice, edited a magazine of advanced views that Bryan had never heard of, and many of the guests contributed to its pages. They were at present in an excited and breathless condition, awaiting the issue of their next number, which might either start a revolution or get them all sent to prison.

"Revolution! Prison!" cried Miss Ridgeworth, beginning to enjoy herself at once. "How splendid! Let me introduce Mr. Vaile. He is a barrister, and can tell you all about the law and prisons and everything."

He was introduced to celebrated people one after another so fast that he could not master their names or ab-

sorb the little biographical sketch that was given with each introduction. They were not Mr. Locke, Mr. Rudyard Kipling, Mr. Thomas Hardy, or Miss Corelli or Mrs. Humphry Ward; he had never before heard one of the names; but he soon began to understand that these were the people of to-morrow, the coming race, the new generation that would push the old favourites from their stools and awaken a sleepy world with something *good*. Meanwhile they really looked dreadful to his unaccustomed eye. The ladies wore dresses of sage green and saffron, cut low at the throat, with necklaces of amber or coral; several of the men also had low necks, with a black bow tie in lieu of the amber beads; and both sexes had bilious complexions, hollow eyes, and hectic flushes. Two squirming young men, dark and fair, were like young women dressed in men's clothes—two male impersonators from a fourth-rate music-hall. One girl, a poetess, had hair dyed a quite ridiculous colour; and several ladies had no hair at all—that is, it was cropped close—and they wore single eye-glasses. These were political writers, belonging to the Women's Future Movement.

The party was taking place in two small rooms, the squash was dense, the heat became terrific. From what people said to him, and from what he heard on all sides, it was evident that the new literature would be principally of the decadent or morbid kind. Everybody, gesticulating as much as space permitted, talked of what their friends had written or were writing, and compliments of the heaviest calibre were fired point-blank.

"How goes the *magnum opus*?" "When do you mean to give the world another *Crystabel's Corruption*?" . . . "You cannot hope to do anything more exquisitely beautiful than *The Vigil of the Corpse*." . . . "I have

been reading *Love in a Maze* for the fourth time. I read *The Garbage Hunt* eight times. They are both of them stupendous." . . . "No, nothing serious of late—merely some verses on Perverted Instincts." . . . "Good! To be published by subscription?" "Yes, the same series as *Songs of Death*."

Bryan was, of course, very polite to everybody, and he tried to make himself agreeable; he felt that it was snobbish to notice the queer costumes and strange manners, or to belittle these people because they were pleased with themselves and each other without apparent reason. And who was he to judge or condemn their art and its canons? Perhaps he ought to respect them, for at least they were living for an ideal, if an odd one. They believed in something beyond mere money; they were better than prosperous stockbrokers and their wives. Indeed, he would not have minded the party—including the male impersonators and the female impersonators—but for one circumstance. Mabel was at the party, and he thought that she ought not to have been brought there.

She looked so sweet and natural in the midst of it all; such a nice figure in her blue tailor-made gown, with her neat veil and the pearls in her ears. He could not get her to talk; she had gone or been pushed into a corner between a window and the tea-table, and he had glimpses of her kind smile as she talked to others. Perhaps it was the contrast with this seedy-looking riff-raff that made her seem so attractive.

He saw her being handed a tea-cup by a red-moustached man, and later, while struggling to secure tea for the last genius to whom he had been presented, he heard what the man was saying to her.

"Yes," said the man, "never thinking, I had run right into it—police trap."

This man with the reddish moustache did not seem properly to belong to the party any more than did Bryan. He looked robust and very prosperous; his clothes were rich and glossy; his face shone, and he grinned and chattered about his motor-car in a self-confident manner. He had been brought here by somebody, and fastening upon Mabel, pleased with her kindly smile and encouraged by her gentleness, he bored her with more and more details about the power of his new engines, the pace he could get out of them, the fines that he was willing to pay for the amusement, and so on. One disliked him instinctively. He was just a vulgar "road hog."

Twice Bryan endeavored to rescue Mabel from him, but each time he was defeated by a fresh introduction and a further claim upon his services in the battle for tea and sponge-cake.

Miss Ridgeworth was enjoying things so enormously that she could not tear herself away from the party; she elbowed her way in the little mob, laughing gaily, tapping poets on the arm, almost digging novelists in the ribs, and getting hotter and hotter every minute.

Leaving at last, she thanked the host effusively. "It has been *such* a privilege. *Too* kind of you to let us come."

She was painfully warm, and slightly dilapidated from the struggle, when they got her downstairs and into the open air. But she said, "Is it not refreshing to have a peep like that at the Art World?"

They were near Campden Hill and Bryan strolled back with her to her house. Mabel had issued from the party with the self-satisfied motorist and a short, brisk lady in velvet; and, to his disappointment, she walked rapidly away with them, just waving her hand to Miss Ridgeworth before she vanished round a corner. Bryan

could not possibly break from his companion and follow her, but, since she was gone, he took the opportunity of talking about her. He ventured to suggest that in the kind of society they had just left, however fascinating for men and women of the world like Miss Ridgeworth and himself, there might be danger to Miss Gresley of making undesirable acquaintances.

"Oh, Mabel can take care of herself all right," said Miss Ridgeworth cheerily.

"No doubt," said Bryan, with an irritation that he found difficult altogether to conceal. "She has always *had* to take care of herself, hasn't she? I mean, it has been nobody else's business to take care of her. Only it struck me that as young girls are so impressionable, perhaps it might—"

"But Mabel isn't impressionable. Very much the reverse. Haven't you observed that? She is a girl of extraordinarily strong character."

Miss Ridgeworth had reached home now, and Bryan accepted her invitation to go into the house.

"Yes, you angels, Auntie's back again. Yes, tinkle de bells and dance on hind legs for Auntie." Then, when the dogs stopped barking, she said, "Of course, it is good of you to take so much interest in Mabel."

"I take the greatest interest in her," he said, and added after a slight pause, "She did not tell you that I asked her to marry me?"

"No, she didn't say a word about it. But I can't pretend to be surprised, after seeing all your kindness, and the attention you pay her—after *profiting* by it"; and Miss Ridgeworth laughed good-humouredly. "What has caused the hitch?"

"She refused me."

"She did, did she? Now I think that's a pity," and

Miss Ridgeworth sighed. "But—well—if Mabel said No, I suppose she must have meant it. Would you like me to tackle her about it?"

"No, not for the world," said Bryan hastily. And just then Miss Jane Ridgeworth put her head in at the drawing-room door.

"Come in, Jane," said her sister. "Don't run away. We are discussing Mabel's future. Mr. Vaile makes no secret of the fact that he proposed to her."

"Just what I guessed," said Miss Jane, becoming shrill immediately. "And though we haven't known you long, we would have given you our blessing, wouldn't we, Kate? But Mabel was stupid and obstinate?"

"Yes," said Miss Kate. "I was telling him that Mabel always was obstinate, and lately she has been turning into a regular brick wall. Isn't it a pity?"

"Yes, I do think it's a pity. But he ought to try his luck again."

"Yes, but I always find Mabel so difficult to argue with when she has made up her mind."

Bryan felt horribly embarrassed and not a little annoyed. He had spoken to Miss Kate of his proposal on the impulse of the moment, without any intention of extending this confidence to her sister; certainly not thinking that the matter was to be debated thus openly. He did not at all like their way of making him pose as a rejected and mortified suitor, or their rapid assumption that he was willing if encouraged to propose again.

"Miss Vansittart," said the maid-servant, announcing a gaily-dressed visitor.

"I have come to ask if I may stop to dinner," said Miss Vansittart. "I have nowhere to go to, and no food to get, and I am very hungry already."

"My dear girl, of *course*. But I don't know if there is any dinner to-night. Jane, didn't Stevens say we were to have sardines and an egg?"

"Make it two eggs for me," said Miss Vansittart. "I haven't done growing, and I do get so hungry."

Bryan bolted. He felt sure that if he stayed the hungry Miss Vansittart would be brought into a resumed conversation about his most private affairs.

He was annoyed with the Miss Ridgeworths. They meant well, but they were too shrill, too silly; and he doubted if he would ever again set foot in the menagerie that served them for a house. Nevertheless, they had given him much to think about. What a strange, what an absurd, conception of Mabel, that she was not impressionable, that she had great strength of character, that she was hardening into a brick wall.

Although his afternoon walks with her on Saturdays and Sundays were not a definitely established custom, they were regularly continued. It was understood that if she had nothing better to do, and the weather permitted, he might act as escort; and he used to watch the barometer anxiously as the week-end approached. If a downpour deprived him of the promenade he generally contrived to meet her somewhere before Sunday night, and it was a grievous disappointment to him when a week-end passed without this pleasant companionship.

Then in the new year, all at once the walks and the meetings ceased. Mabel had not disappeared again, but she had become inaccessible. She was not at home if he ventured to call at Number 10; she was never to be found at Campden Hill; she sent messages through her cousins declining to make up theatre parties. Once he let himself in for a theatre party without her, because Miss

Ridgeworth had promised and failed to produce her. This was too much; and he wrote to Mabel, remonstrating, asking in effect what she meant by it.

She replied, thanking him for his theatre kindness and for all the trouble he had taken walking about London, but saying in effect that she did not mean to go out for amusement or exercise with him again.

He was so much fussed and disconcerted by this reply that he could not get on with his work. He was always thinking of her—thinking of nothing else. He was no good for anything because of the worry of it. And suddenly, thinking of her thus, he realised how completely she had cured him of his pain about Diana. He never gave Diana a transient thought nowadays; when he heard her name casually mentioned he did not even wince. He ought to be for ever grateful to Mabel for this, whatever happened.

At the end of a useless, wasted day he rushed off to see Miss Kate Ridgeworth at the bonnet shop, and to obtain if possible some explanation of Mabel's disturbing note. Miss Kate received him in a small parlour or counting-house behind the shop. There were no parrots here, thank goodness, and he shut the door and stood with his back against it to prevent interruptions.

"I think myself," said Miss Ridgeworth, "that it's a pity things have worked out like this. But there it is. And, of course, you ought to know about it."

And sympathetically, wishing to spare his feelings but having her duty to perform, she gave him a knock-down blow.

He was not the only man in the world. Well then, another man was now available if Mabel wished for an escort. A nice solid sort of man had appeared, and he wanted to marry Mabel.

"Who is he?"

"A Mr. Wainwright."

"Wainwright!" said Bryan, so surprised that he spoke very abruptly. "That was the name of a murderer."

"Yes, but in the dark ages. This Mr. Wainwright must be well under forty—far too young to have any connection. . . . No, I assure you, he is quite all right."

"What is he?"

"He's a merchant."

"What of?"

"I believe it's soap and leather, but I'm not sure. Mabel knows, of course."

"How long has Mabel known him?"

"Not a great while. She met him last autumn."

"But what kind of a man? Surely not worthy of Mabel?"

"To begin with, he certainly means business. He seems to be very well off. He has a stupendous motor-car that travels faster than—"

A flash of divination made Bryan break in indignantly. "Motor-car! Travels fast! Is he the road-hog?"

"I don't understand."

"Did Mabel meet the fellow first at Mr. Clarendon Pirkis's literary party?"

"I'm not sure. Yes, I rather think she did. But he is a friend of Mrs. George Gresley's."

"A big, self-satisfied fellow with a red moustache?"

"Yes, I wouldn't call it red. His hair—I mean the hair on his head—is dark brown."

"Surely he's impossible," said Bryan, more indignantly. "Miss Ridgeworth, *you* don't approve of him? *You* don't think he's good enough for her?"

"There's nothing against him—to my mind—except

this." Miss Ridgeworth spoke with hesitation, and then laughed. "He is rather stout."

"Only rather?"

"Yes. I don't think I ought to call him at all stout at present—merely solid. But I myself have such a horror of stoutness; and, looking at Mr. Wainwright now, I seem to see him in twenty years' time, *enormous*. . . . No, forget that I said so. With me it's a craze—fatness—and all nonsense as far as Mr. Wainwright is concerned, probably. He may escape it, too, if he does Swedish exercises. Anyhow, I am sure the idea has never come into Mabel's head, and it would be wicked to put it there."

Then Miss Ridgeworth talked with much wisdom and kindness. She said that they were all very anxious for Mabel's welfare, that she knew Mr. Vaile was just as anxious for it as any of them, that one cannot have everything in life, and that if Mr. Wainwright offered a fair chance of comfort, ease, and contentment, it would be very wrong to prevent dear Mabel from taking the chance.

"But it's no chance if she doesn't care for him. And she can't care for him."

"She will care for him later on. I think she would soon get fond of him, if—"; and Miss Ridgeworth paused.

"If what?"

"If you would leave her alone. And, honestly, I think you ought to leave her alone now."

"You do—for *her* sake?"

"Yes, I do, honestly."

V

HE DETERMINED to leave her alone. The sadness of renunciation softened him; he obliterated his prejudices against an innocuous stranger; he tried to see everything in a purely unselfish light. What does the colour of your moustache matter if you succeed in your career, if you can afford to purchase all that makes up comfort according to the modern measure, if you really know your own mind and mean business all the time?

Thinking of it unselfishly, he felt that it was better so. He had no confidence in himself. This solid man would make her a good husband; he would give her a luxurious home—they would be happy. She would be safer in his hands. There could be no fancies or doubts or immaturity of purpose and failure of decision about this solid, successful man.

But then he went on thinking of it, and the more he thought the less he liked it. For her sake, not for his sake, he revolted against the whole idea. She would for ever miss all that makes the highest joy of life. This common fellow would use her, just as others had used her—making her a housekeeper, a secretary, a support; an attentive listener to his stupid business plans and a sympathiser for his vulgar boastings. He would not really guard her and cherish her, giving her the tenderness, the admiration, the delicate care that women must have in order to be in truth happy.

He wrote to her, taking great trouble to make his letter strong in logic as well as eloquent in language, and urged her not to act hastily. He begged to repeat what

he had said to her last September, and he asked that she would reconsider her decision and give him a favourable answer this time.

But truly she had become like a brick wall. Words, however carefully chosen, produced no effect upon her. She answered that she saw no reason to do as he suggested; she did not even believe that he was in deadly earnest; she pretended to know what was best for him as well as for herself. "If I did what you ask," she said, "you would be the first to regret it. You don't really wish it. You only ask me because of what happened at Bournemouth."

He did wish it, and he knew now that he would not regret it. If through his shilly-shallying attitude he had lost her irretrievably, he would never forgive himself. The mental picture of her going through life with a stout, dull merchant was intolerable to him. His mind became like a cinematograph theatre that was always open and never changed its programme; he saw there all day and half the night an endless film that showed him Mabel and the other man—Mabel, neatly dressed in her blue cloth dress, fur boa, and black toque, walking swiftly to the pillar-box with a note addressed to Mr. Wainwright; Mabel without a hat, seated in a room, looking up with a smile, to welcome Mr. Wainwright as he approached in a confident, proprietorial manner; Mabel, wrapped up so that one could hardly recognise her, getting into an immense motor-car with Mr. Wainwright and vanishing amidst dust and smoke.

At the week-end he got hold of her, in spite of all impediments, and implored her to throw over the other man and take him instead.

"Don't talk so loud," said Mabel. "Everybody in the house will hear you."

"I don't care who hears me, so long as you'll listen to reason." But he nevertheless dropped his voice. They were in the ground floor sitting-room at her lodgings, to which he had forced an entrance, although the landlady seemed reluctant to admit him; and he drew a chair close to Mabel's at the table beneath the chandelier, took possession of her hands, and continued his urgent appeal. "I implore you to give up the idea of it. You can't really like him. I *know* it. I can see it in your face."

Her forehead was puckered, her lips drooped, and she looked at him in the way that he remembered so well.

"Mabel, you *can't* do it. Be reasonable."

"I don't think you are reasonable yourself."

"You are not formally engaged to him?"

"No."

Then he argued with her strenuously. However late in the day, even at the church door, it is better to change one's mind than to commit an irrevocable blunder. For a woman marriage is everything, it is much too sacred to play about with; she would spoil her life for ever if she married the wrong man.

And again she said, "Why do you ask me?"

"I'll tell you. I ask you because I can't do without you—because I have nothing to live for, nothing to hope for, unless I get you."

"But you are not in love with me."

"Yes, I am. I love everything you say, everything you think, everything you do."

"Ah, that's not being in love with me."

And this was true. There were so many things about Diana that he did not really approve of, that he even secretly condemned, and yet he had been madly in love with her.

"Mabel, I am sorry for his disappointment, if he *has*

entertained hopes, but it can't be helped. I dare say he is a much better fellow than I am; but you would never be happy with him. It isn't as if you cared for money. No doubt he can offer you much more—of that sort of thing—but it would be no use to you. He wouldn't understand you, he wouldn't value you as I shall. . . .

"And you must like me best. Mabel, think of how well we got on together—from the very first. You couldn't have been so sweet to me unless we suited each other. We *do* suit each other. We're such pals, such companions. . . . Well, that counts for so much in marriage. Some people say it is everything. . . .

"Remember, too, that I have always shown you the worst side of myself. Goodness knows I'm not worthy of you—but truly I am not a bad sort. Mabel, you said something that I shall never forget. You said you were fond of the man that at first you thought I was. Well, I'll be the man you thought I was. I swear I'll be good and true to you. If you'll only risk it, I swear I'll never let you down. I'll be *all* that you fancied. Trust me—and you shan't regret it."

At last he made her really believe, and she agreed.

"I trust you," she said. "After all, why should you go on saying it if you don't mean it?"

And it was all right about the other man. Things had not gone too far with the poor wretch; there would be no awkward backing out to be done by Mabel; there was only one man in the world that she could ever really care for—and his name was Bryan Vaile. Miss Ridgeworth and other honest well-wishers had perhaps thought it advisable to push Mabel over the brink of a marriage of convenience, trusting that if she went over with her eyes open she might fall on her feet; but Mabel herself had never liked the look of the precipice.

Bryan hurried her off to Campden Hill to proclaim the glad tidings and receive the blessing that the Miss Ridgeworths had once said they were prepared to give. It was given now with shrill joy.

"Pollie, they are engaged. Yes, scream, Pollie. Bark it loud, you angels. There's a wedding in the family. Call Jane. Tell Stevens she can't go to church this evening. The engaged couple will stay to dinner."

The little dogs barked, the parrot screamed, the singing birds nearly broke the glass of the aviary; the Miss Ridgeworths yelled the news up and down stairs, through open doors; a maidservant shouted it on the telephone; and an unknown young lady in a picture hat and ermine stole burst upon them and cried, "This *is* ripping. I *am* so glad."

Bryan did not mind the noise, and he liked to hear the good news published so promptly and widely. He wanted all the world to know it. He could have stopped strangers in the street to tell them that he had won the best, the dearest girl, and that he was the happiest man alive.

The sun shone clear again, making all things bright, brighter than they had ever been, because everything was real and substantial now, not imagined. Bryan had an object in life; he felt strong and healthy; his happiness made him work hard without fatigue, eat ravenously without indigestion, and sleep long hours without a dream. He thought of himself with profound humility as to the past and with exalted confidence as to the future. What an ass, what a sickly dreamer, what a never-do-nothing he had always been. But now, with Mabel to work for, he would soon show that there was something in him.

Mabel herself opened out like a flower that had only

been waiting for sunshine to display its coloured petals and give its fragrance to the air. It was a revelation to him that love can so change and glorify a girl who wants to love. She told him how strong and deep her feelings had always been, and how she had never enjoyed a proper outlet for them. She said things about him that made him ashamed and yet happier still. She had wanted to love him from the very beginning; he had seemed to her the perfect knight that comes to cut the maiden's bonds and lead her by the hand to a place of love and safety. She said too, "If you failed me now, I should kill myself." And she added, "If you failed me *ever*, I should kill myself."

Why should he ever fail her? She was not only the jolliest of companions, she was wise and good and strong. Every day he found new charm in her. She was by no means as simple as he supposed; she had a luminous common sense that enabled her to look beneath the surface of things and form judgments so rapidly that one did not at first give them all the credit they deserved for their correctness. She had much quiet humour herself and a generously appreciative recognition of the smallest jokes made by others. What more could a man ask for?

He felt fatuously happy in the bright spring weather, thinking how absurd it was at his age. Thirty-five, yet here he was, feeling what boys feel, enjoying a fresh transfiguration of London, admiring the sunlit pavements, the budded trees, the smoke-stained sky; having palpitations of the heart until a house agent removed all doubt as to his being able to secure the little flat near the Marylebone Road that he and she had chosen together. Going to shops with her was going to fairyland. They were buying for their home; and every common object—even each pot and pan—was fine, toylike, de-

lightful, because he was with her, because the kettle was for *them*, because they were to be together always.

One day, after shopping, she said, "Something has happened, Bryan. You are in love with me now."

And this, too, was true. She said it proudly, her eyes shining, her face all lit up; and, as she said it, she was absolutely beautiful.

They were to be married from the house on Campden Hill, and the Miss Ridgeworths meant to make the wedding a real lark for everybody. Mabel, feeling that her father ought to be dragged out and shown as a sort of family picture on this occasion, took Bryan down to Brighton to see him.

He met them at the Brighton railway-station, gave them an excellent luncheon at the Métropole Hotel, walked a little distance with them on their way back to the station, and really that was all about it. He was a thin, fresh-complexioned man in a rather sporting though shabby tweed suit, with white spats and a pearl-gray Homburg hat; his eyes were brown like Mabel's, and he had a pleasant smile and laugh, but his manner was curiously detached, as of one who has much on his mind and cannot therefore give you sustained attention. He talked to Mabel as though she was somebody that he had known a long time and always liked, although they met so rarely; and Mabel, while talking to him, showed, as well as genuine affection, a quite unreasoning pride in him and a great tenderness.

"Do you get your rides here, father?"

"Yes, Mab, I ride every morning. Are you riding—in London?"

"No, father, I never have ridden. But Bryan rides sometimes."

"That's right, Vaile. It's worth it—even in London.

For a busy man especially — better than medicine, as you'll find out when you're my age."

"Have you got a dog here, father?"

"Yes, Mab—a bull-terrier. I'll show him to you if we have time after lunch. I didn't bring him to the station because he can't bear that mangy retriever with the money-box. He went for him the other day and shook out a lot of coppers, and I had the whole station about my ears.

"By the way," he said, when they were seated at luncheon, "I don't want to play the heavy father — Mabel knows I never do; but what about settlements? Oughtn't you young people to have a marriage settlement?"

"I am afraid," said Bryan, "I have nothing to settle."

"No, but perhaps she has," said Mr. Gresley. "One ought to ask a lawyer. But you *are* a lawyer, Vaile. There's certainly money coming to her—some day"; and he smiled at Mabel.

"You don't know how much?" asked Mabel, smiling back at him.

"No. If I ever heard I have forgotten. It was your great-aunt Wyckham's will—all tied up in shares; a share must come to you—some day." And he shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps it's not worth bothering about. Your Aunt Harriet may live to a hundred"; and he ceased speaking of business matters, as though already they had tired him. "Don't look round now. But presently just observe the man with the big nose at the second table on your left. I'll tell you something about him that will make you laugh."

When Mabel was bidding him good-bye in West Street she asked him for a promise that he would come to the wedding and give her away.

"It's not worth making promises that I mayn't be able to keep," he said amiably. "But I'll do my best."

One felt that he would always do his best; but, as Mabel had once indicated, even at his best he was no good to anybody, including himself.

"He is *such* a dear," said Mabel sadly and tenderly. "We *will* be kind to him, Bryan, won't we? He'll never trouble us, you know. You'll let me be kind to all my relations, won't you?"

Considering how little her relations had ever done for her, Bryan thought this anxiety showed another proof of her affectionate magnanimous nature.

Travelling back to London and afterwards they made a joke between them about her expectations on the death of Aunt Harriet. "I am an heiress-hunter," he said. "I am marrying you for your money—nothing else."

Miss Ridgeworth had told him to announce his engagement in the newspaper, and he did so now, after having received the implied approval of his father-in-law. Not quite sure how these notices should be worded, he consulted a copy of the *Morning Post* for a pattern; but, by curious chance, he happened to find there only one such notice, and it was of so important and grand a character that it could not be safely imitated in humble everyday cases.

A marriage, said the *Morning Post*, had been arranged and would shortly take place between the Duke of Middlesborough and Miss Diana Kenion.

A duke? Well, Diana was out for big game, and he felt glad that she had got such a fine head. He sat thinking of her, wishing her luck, and hoping that she would be a happy duchess. It seemed to him that she was some character that he had seen in a play or read about in a

book, and not a real person that he had known quite well. Certainly the foolish fellow who dangled after her less than a year ago had so completely ceased to exist that he could scarce believe it was himself.

The wedding came off on a Saturday afternoon, when the bonnet shop was shut; it was a jolly, larkish wedding, and the Miss Ridgeworths and all their friends thoroughly enjoyed it. Mabel as a bride looked beautiful, and her girl-friends agreed that Bryan was "a lovely man." In the church he was surprised by the strength of his emotions; he felt an immense yearning love as Mabel knelt beside him; her bowed head reminded him of the night when he made her cry, and he vowed and vowed in his heart to guard her and cherish her and never to fail her.

VI

WHEN BRYAN VAILE first began to hanker after the pleasures of dramatic authorship he started a note-book in which he might jot down the bright ideas that suddenly occurred to him or the rough aphorisms that with conscientious labor could be worked up into polished and pointed lines. He believed, erroneously, that this was the right way to set about the job, and two of his earliest jottings were these:—

(1) "Marriage is a mystery to all except the married, and to them it is so dreadful a mystery that they cannot speak of it."

(2) "Married life is a wonderful system of give and take; but until you get married you never know which is to give and which is to take."

Well, he knew now that No. 1 was the very cheapest kind of nonsense, with no germ of truth to justify the aphoristic form; for he was always ready to bubble over with talk about the calm joy of marriage. And as to No. 2, he knew that, however the account stands in material things, Love can always strike an equal balance; Love will not permit of any debtor and creditor statement of the partnership, so long as each partner is willing and anxious to give all.

Yet the recognition of this obvious fact did not check the growth of his gratitude to Mabel. Truly from the very beginning she was the one who gave. She made a man of him. She did everything in the world for him;

she made him believe in himself, because she believed in him; she lifted him up and sustained him and kept him happy.

It was she who rescued him from the intolerable dullness of the law courts and gave him the world of imagination in exchange. He wanted to abandon his profession and take to the precarious trade of play-writing, although he did not feel justified in doing so. His first three-act play had been acted for a hundred nights and had thereby achieved the titular honours of success, but it had not brought him much money. Still, experts said he should strike again while the iron was luke-warm; he must keep hammering away or his chances would vanish. On the other hand, as a husband and a father, he ought not to run risks. They had one child already and the prospect of soon having another; but Mabel was courageous enough to run any risks. She was confident that he would not fail to keep some sort of pot boiling, and she told him to go straight ahead without fear.

And the bold decision was made before she came into her inheritance. Almost immediately afterwards her Aunt Harriet, instead of living to a hundred as she might have done, was good enough to die at the age of seventy, and Mabel became possessed of six or seven hundred a year. This made all easy and smooth for Bryan; they would not starve now, whatever happened; relieved of anxiety, he could peg away with his pen in comfort of body and mind.

Another jotting in the soon-abandoned note-book was as follows: "Some men strive for fame and some for money, and often they might eventually get both if they never tried for either, but merely worked hard at whatever work lay before them."

This not very brilliant generalisation was perhaps the

gem of the note-book; at any rate it seemed to him to contain something like a useful truth, and from the outset of his serious effort he conscientiously followed its guidance. He worked really hard, hoping that in his case a capacity for taking pains might fill the large gap left by the absence of genius; not waiting for the high inspiration that did not arrive, but using the commonplace material that lay handy; determined that he would at least achieve quantity in output if quality was impossible.

Success came with only just sufficient delay and difficulty to make its taste the pleasanter.

He had a nasty little set-back with his second play, which was withdrawn because it failed to attract, and a disappointment or postponing of hope in regard to his third play. It was a domestic drama, and the great Mr. Richard Vandaleur fell violently in love with it. He announced his passion for the play on the telephone one summer evening about six o'clock, and such was his excitement and rapture that he seemed to Bryan more like a delightful explosive volcano erupting at the other end of the telephone wire than an illustrious actor-manager telling a humble stranger that he intended to produce his work on the stage. "Can you hear me? . . . Fits me like a glove. . . . Colossal. . . . Been waiting for it. . . . The public. . . . See me in emotional part. . . . Not the tripe I've had to do. . . . Mean to put it up at once. . . . Run a year in London, then take it to the States . . . four years. . . . Biggest money-maker since *East Lynne*. . . . Sup with me at Betterton Club. . . . Yes, to-night. . . . Talk over details."

The volcanic warmth of Mr. Vandaleur, even at two miles' distance, made Bryan hot and red and shaky, so that his wife sprang up alarmed, thinking he was ill, when he rushed to her with the glorious news.

"Mr. Vandaleur! The Minerva Theatre! Oh, Bryan! Didn't I know you were a genius!"

They kept kissing and clasping each other's hands convulsively, and then they went for a long ride on the tops of several omnibuses to cool themselves and count their chickens before they were hatched, and kill the feverish time that intervened between now and supper at the Betterton Club with Mr. Vandaleur.

Then for months Bryan was the willing and excited slave of Mr. Vandaleur, being slapped on the back and embraced by Vandaleur, laughing at Vandaleur's noisy humor, almost crying in sympathy over Vandaleur's love affairs, feeding Vandaleur and eating Vandaleur's food to a quite fantastic extent. They were Dick and Bryan now—not any more Vandaleur and Vaile, and it seemed fabulous that they had ever been Mr. Vandaleur and Mr. Vaile. Bryan had to spend week-ends at Dick's country cottage to talk about the cast of the play, and all the week he re-wrote the play to make it suit the people that Dick intended to engage. He had re-written it six times already, but Dick always had further suggestions for improvement. Sometimes he telephoned in the middle of the night merely to gloat over the money that the play was going to make for both of them. "Dear old boy, we'll scoop the pool with it. It's the biggest thing I have ever done. It's straight to the heart. It rings true. That's what the public have been hungering for. We'll put it into rehearsal next month."

Then something unexpected occurred. Mr. Vandaleur let his theatre for two months to a company of Nigger Minstrels from America, and soon afterwards Bryan read a newspaper paragraph which said that Mr. Vandaleur had secured a farcical comedy by Mr. Hankey Pritt

and intended to make this his autumn production at the Minerva.

Bryan would not believe it, could not believe it; but Vandaleur, writing to him from Devonshire contritely, yet firmly, said that it was so. "On consideration I fear there is no money in your play. Those with whom I am compelled to consult came to this conclusion, although agreeing with me as to its literary merit. I am myself afraid of the somewhat heavy interest, admirable as it is. You see, the public ask to be amused and not to have their emotions stirred. They like to laugh and not to think. Moreover, they look for me in a certain style of part, and I doubt if it would be fair to them or myself to attempt experiments in a totally different line."

Still Bryan could scarcely believe it. Dick's conduct seemed so monstrous and absurd. Why should he think one thing one minute and a diametrically opposite thing the next minute? But those older and wiser than himself in the ways of the theatrical world told him that this was just like Dick Vandaleur, and that one ought not to have expected anything else from him. They said that Dick never had an opinion of his own; he was a weathercock as well as a gas-bag and a humbug. They further explained that Dick's productions were never financed by himself, and that a well-known Mr. So-and-So was putting up the money to produce Hankey Pritt's farce in order to foist a certain Miss Merridew upon the long-suffering public as a comedy actress.

Mrs. Vaile loyally said all the rude things about Mr. Vandaleur which her husband felt it would be beneath his dignity to say himself, but which he was glad to hear said by somebody else. With some bitterness of spirit he thought of his wasted time, and sat down to re-write

the play once more, getting all the Vandaleur flavour out of it. Then something else that no one could have expected occurred.

Mr. Kelly Gifford, the actor, called upon him at his flat near the Marylebone Road, and said with solemnity, "You may not be aware of it, but I have acquired a lease of the Quadrant Theatre. Now, have you anything in your desk likely to suit me? You know what I can do, and I dare say you can make a tolerable guess of what I *can't* do."

Gifford was a very different sort of person from Vandaleur, an earnest, straightforward kind of man, not exactly a popular favourite, but with a respectable following of sober admirers, and he frankly stated his reason for applying to Vaile in this manner.

He said that he wanted to open his theatre with a play from Bryan's pen because he could obtain any amount of money as "backing" for any play written by the author of *Evelyn Lestrangle*.

Bryan was so astounded that he could only murmur, "*Evelyn Lestrangle* was a howling failure."

"Did not catch on," said Gifford, politely. "Nevertheless, it attracted attention. There was good work in it—so good in the opinion of some people, apparently, that they are prepared to put up big money in support of their opinion."

"But what people?"

"The offer has come to me through Wilkinsons', the solicitors."

Bryan could not at first credit this flattering notion of unknown admirers willing to invest money as proof of their admiration; and, rendered suspicious by his recent disappointment and the revelations of experienced friends, he asked many questions.

"If it's not a joke," he said, "I suppose it means that some yellow-haired minx is to be pushed in as leading lady."

"The leading lady in my theatre," said Gifford, with dignity, "will be Miss Clarence, and nobody else."

"May I go and see these solicitors—Wilkinsons'—and talk about it?"

"By all means"; and Gifford told him that Wilkinsons' were a firm that did a lot of theatrical business, acting for authors, managers, theatre owners, and everybody else connected with the stage. They looked after your contracts, wrote to the newspapers for you when you were insulted, defended you as co-respondent in divorce actions, looked after you and took charge of you generally.

Bryan's interview with the firm was éminently satisfactory. There was no blonde young lady in the background; it was straightforward, above-board business; certain people believed in his capability as a dramatist and were prepared to advance money for the production of his plays.

"There is nothing very unusual in the matter," said Mr. Wilkinson. "Quite a large number of people are interested in theatrical enterprise, and like to have an occasional flutter; and it is a mistake to suppose that they always lose their money. The money, let us hope, will not be lost in this case."

"But you can't tell me who your clients are?"

No, Mr. Wilkinson was acting for another firm of solicitors, who, not being connected with theatrical affairs themselves, had naturally turned to him. This other firm did not mention any client's name.

"Of course," said Mr. Wilkinson, smiling, "it may be some personal well-wishers—a little syndicate of your

friends and relations—or some rich uncle who wants to give his brilliant nephew a push.”

Bryan laughed. Mr. Wilkinson’s surmise was not very near the mark. Bryan had no rich uncles, and he did not remember any friends and relations likely to go into theatrical speculation on his behalf.

“Very well then,” said Mr. Wilkinson, “you have had the good fortune to reach a discriminating and affluent section of the public, and you can avail yourself of the chance with an easy conscience. Leave the whole thing to Mr. Gifford and myself. It really is our affair, and, honestly, I don’t know why he should have troubled you about it. You are, of course, dealing with him, and he will deal with me.”

Bryan was more than satisfied, he was intensely gratified; and he left Gifford and Wilkinson to conclude arrangements with the kindly and discerning capitalists who had been attracted by *Evelyn Lestrangle*, although it failed to attract the public. For a moment the idea had passed through his mind that the unknown backer of his fortunes might be none other than his own wife. Had Mabel, burning with resentment against Mr. Vandaleur, and seeing her husband surrounded with difficulties, attempted a magnificent scheme of rescue? It would have been like her to risk her comfort for his sake, but unlike her to do anything in a secret manner, and two words with her showed that she was in no way implicated. With a light heart he re-wrote his play a few more times for Mr. Gifford; it was produced as Mr. Gifford’s opening venture; and it caught on. The money advanced for this enterprise was soon repaid, and no further backing was ever needed by Bryan. In the current phrase, he never looked behind him after this.

He slogged along at his work now, and with full con-

fidence as to results, year after year turning out plays of comfortable middle-class domestic interest, pleasing the public, and steadily making money. He was not in the front rank of European literature, he did not challenge the supremacy of master hands, but he was a conscientious craftsman working at his art as if it was an ordinary trade, and doing extremely well at it. If anyone, wishing to be unkind, said that he was merely pot-boiling, they could not wound him; because to boil the pot for his wife and children had been his prime aim, and his greatest pride lay in the thought of how fine and large a pot it was and how well and regularly kept on the boil.

Nevertheless, he liked his work for the work's sake. He had grown to love the theatre itself. It was not only the delight in seeing the dry bones of a play come to life, watching the development of the illusion he had planned, but the very atmosphere of the stage became pleasant to him. The people of the stage amused him and were dear to him, now that he understood them. They were like children, often very naughty children, and yet good at heart; ruled by the heart always as children are, refusing to listen to reason—indeed, not knowing what reason is—but giving instant response to an appeal to their better feelings; exploding sometimes on the impulse of a moment into extravagant action that reversed everything that they had been promising, vowing, or threatening for months previously. They all liked Bryan, trusted him. When they quarrelled at rehearsals they at once fetched him out of the obscure corner where as author of the play it was his duty to sit and keep his mouth shut, and asked him to say which was right and which was wrong. Of course, he was not so foolish as to say anything of the sort; but he soothed them, and distracted their attention, and asked irrelevant questions until they all made

it up again and sent him back to his corner. He enjoyed the late luncheons with them at restaurants after rehearsals; he was fond of his two theatrical clubs; he loved the jovial chattering supper-parties that gathered a whole company together in celebration of the hundredth night of a successful run. He even liked that wonderful stage light, Mr. Richard Vandaleur. Dick had never borne rancour for the dirty way in which he had treated Bryan, and he boisterously gloried in his dear old friend's triumphant success. There was no real harm in Dick; he was merely preposterous. He patted Bryan whenever near enough at the club, and once publicly embraced him in the street. "Dear old boy, never forget that I was the first to see all there was in you. You owe me one for that. Eh? Ha-ha! Some day you must do me something really big. Fantastic character, eh? Fresh ground. Break fresh ground. Force, emotion, something that rings true, instead of the tripe I'm doing now."

So the pleasant years passed, and envious people could forgive Bryan his prosperity because in the midst of success he remained so modest and unassuming that it must be natural and not just an affected pose. He never wrote to the newspapers, never made a speech, never came before the curtain to bow his acknowledgments to an audience. But, although invisible on first nights of his own plays, he regularly attended other people's first nights, and you could not see Mr. and Mrs. Vaile taking their seats in the stalls on one of these exciting occasions without understanding how popular they both were. Nearly all the first-nighters seemed to know them and to be glad that they had come. And they themselves seemed so glad to be there. One met them also at private views of pictures, at the houses of artists on Show Sunday, at places of amusement like Hurlingham and Ranelagh; but they

were never met with in the great world—not even at the monstrous evening parties of political leaders, assemblies so astoundingly big that it seems impossible anybody can have been left out. For many reasons Bryan fought shy of the nobs. He had the feeling nowadays that people in high places are like auctioneers in the rostrum; one is afraid to nod to them for fear they should take it as a bid. And he did not like the idea of being trotted out as a celebrity; above all, being trotted out without his wife. So he parried a few friendly advances from potentates that he had known in the past, and made no new fashionable acquaintances that he could politely avoid. Occasionally, of course, one of those noble ladies who make it a point of honour to know men of letters beat down all his defences, insisted on knowing Mr. Vaile, and had herself brought to see him at his charming house in the Regent's Park. "Yes, here I am," said the most illustrious of these ladies, archly and yet truculently. "As the mountain would not come to Mahomed, Mahomed has come to the mountain." Mr. and Mrs. Vaile received this and other Mahomedes with a good grace, but the mountain did not pay any return visits.

Certainly he had no fear that Mabel would not cut a good figure or show to disadvantage with birds of the finest feathers, at Lady Paramount's or anywhere else; it was only that he did not want to go there. She looked magnificent when dressed in highest state and wearing the jewels that he had bought for her; but it became a joke between them that because of their mode of life the opportunities for this display had narrowed down to the one annually afforded by the Royal Academy Soirée. The Academy Soirée was a yearly treat at which Mrs. Vaile wore her diamonds and pearls and her grand frock; and from the age of five each of their three children well

understood the family joke, keeping awake or being awakened for a dazzling glimpse of Mummy in her best clothes.

They both loved the *soirée*, doing it with vigour, meeting there many friends that they valued, not missing one type of eccentric character, queer costume, or strange deportment in all the seething crowd. They came early and stayed late; for the fun of the thing they even had refreshments there, plunging gaily into the dangerous tussle on the stone stairs and letting themselves be pushed and pummelled all the way down into the cellars, where the last ice had long since melted and the last cup of tea been spilt by a waiter over somebody's shoulders or back.

The *soirée* was Mabel's night out. In the big room she moved surrounded by a band of friends; and Bryan followed in her train, admiring the effect of the diamonds on her pretty hair, her splendour, and her graciousness in spite of the grand appearance. He was pleased to observe that others were admiring her. That super-snob, Mr. Ambrose Lake, the critic, was hanging on to her, wanting people to see him going about the room with a comely, well-dressed woman, although she hadn't a handle to her name.

"Come along, Bryan," she said gaily. "Mr. Lake says we must look at the picture of the Duchess of Middlesborough."

The crowd was thick in front of the full-length portrait of the famous duchess who had once been a Miss Diana Kenion. Bryan glanced at the tall, slim figure, the beautiful face, and the dark hair. "I want you to notice the treatment of that gauze," said Mr. Lake, half closing his eyes and holding up a fat hand affectedly. "The flesh tone shown through it. Very good indeed."

All about him people were gazing and whispering, and

one could guess well enough the sort of thing they whispered. Bryan had heard it often, and it did not interest him. She was so prominent, so beautiful, so continually in the public eye, that all the world had been talking of her for years. Alas, she was a duchess that could not perhaps have flourished in the reign of Victoria. It was said that she provided the money for a recent opera season, and her name was connected with that of a famous tenor. But her name had been connected with so many names—with every name, one might almost say, except the Duke's.

"Pardon me," Mr. Lake was murmuring, "if I now abandon you. That is Lord Bedminster over there, beckoning to me. If you can wait a minute, I will introduce him to you."

They did not wait. The annual treat was nearly over; and soon they went home to the Regent's Park for supper, and to put the jewels safely away for another year.

It really was a charming house, as everybody said. Old-fashioned of aspect, with white walls, pillared portico, green verandahs, it was large and roomy inside; and it had a splendid big garden, with two tennis-courts at the bottom where much strenuous tennis was played on summer evenings and all day long on Sundays. It was a hospitable house. Mabel's innumerable relatives came to stay there in relays, and they were all of them nice and jolly and no nuisance to Bryan. Mabel was the head of her immense family now, and she was looked up to as its chieftain instead of being treated as a hanger-on. And young people, the sons and daughters of friends, had the run of the house, coming in and out of the house as if it belonged to them, making Mrs. Vaile a deputy aunt and considering Mr. Vaile as an uncle by courtesy. The mistress of the house was careful that they did not

disturb him, and the company of these honest lads and jolly, innocent girls was very pleasant to him. He was kind to them and would do anything to help them, and they all adored his wife. The girls, when engaged to be married, always came to tell her, sometimes before they told anyone else; and when she wished them joy they used to say, "If only we can be like you and Uncle Bryan. That's all I ask."

It was a beautifully managed house; for Mabel Vaile, although so long homeless, possessed an innate genius for home. The children were well-behaved; the servants were contented; directly one came in at its front door one felt comfortable, happy, at peace. But each time that Bryan came in at the door, and heard that the house did not contain her, he realised more completely that she herself was the source of all its pleasure and comfort. Sometimes when he had hurried home, expecting to find her, thinking that they would get a stroll together before dinner, it fell upon him with more than the coldness of disappointment that she had gone out and that he must miss this solace. The pretty rooms seemed blankly dull; the fine pieces of antique furniture that they had purchased with such pride were heavy and sombre; his own room was no longer a delightful retreat, but an uninteresting, commonplace workshop; the garden, with all the laburnums and lilacs in full flower, was dismal and dust-coloured; everything was different. The house was nothing without her in it, and he understood better than ever how utterly lost he would be if deprived of his dear comrade and friend.

She was at once his support in all passing difficulty and his reward for every honest effort. There was no joy to which she did not add brightness. There was no hour of depression so gloomy that she could not lighten

it for him. He had occasional fits of depression, and they always sprang from the same cause. All things were going so well with him, except one thing—and that was his golf. It seemed to him sometimes that his golf had gone to rack and ruin.

When he returned from a disastrous day at Woking, before he went into the room where the children's voices sounded gaily, he paused in the hall, schooling his face, trying to look cheerful, saying to himself, "I will not let Mabel and the kids see that I am annoyed." But when the little innocents sprang up to greet him and invited him to join in a romping game, he simply could not make merry with them.

"No," said Mabel, with ready tact, "your daddy has had a long day and he is very tired." Her watchful eyes read the sad truth in a moment; and she sent the children up to the school-room. "Yes, run off, Enid. Here's your battledore, Nancy. Go along, Jack. Daddy and I want to have a quiet talk."

When the children were gone she busied herself about the room, not speaking, not even looking at Bryan as he sat and brooded heavily. At last she said quite carelessly, as though it were a matter of no consequence, "I am afraid you didn't do yourself justice to-day, Bryan."

"No. If I did justice to myself as a golf-player, I should hang myself. That's all I deserve."

Mabel laughed, as if well amused. "But you know what I meant. You let that Mr. Herapath beat you?"

"Yes, a child of two could do that. But it wasn't being beaten that annoyed me."

"No, I am quite sure of that. No one could be a better loser than you are."

"I ought to be able to lose well," said Bryan, with sudden intensity of bitterness. "I get plenty of practise

at it, don't I? No, what upset me was that I behaved as if it was the first time in my life that I'd ever had a wooden club in my hands."

"But how *extraordinary*! I wonder what was wrong. You know J. H. Taylor himself said you had a simply perfect swing."

"Oh, I dare say I swing all right when there doesn't happen to be a ball there that requires hitting."

"Probably the merest trifle was putting you off your game."

"Yes, a trifle called either incompetence or imbecility—call it which you like"; and he stared at a lozenge of the parquetry as though keeping his eye on the ball and never meaning to raise his head again.

"You know, if I were you, Bryan, I wouldn't sit down under my wrongs"; and she strongly advised him to go for Mr. Herapath in a return match and wipe the floor with him. "I'm sure you'll do it next time."

"I don't want to see a golf-course for six months. No, I shall give golf a long holiday, and get on with my work. Thank heaven, golf isn't the only thing in the world."

There was the same expression in Mrs. Vaile's kind face as when she looked at one of her sick children—comprehension, sympathy, love mingled in it. She ceased pretending to rearrange a bowl of flowers, and spoke briskly and firmly.

"Bryan, you can't possibly leave off with such a nasty taste in your mouth. You must play to-morrow."

"Out of the question."

"Yes, I'll come with you. We'll go down to Sunningdale to-morrow morning, and you shall play me nine holes before luncheon, just to recover your form; and then you can get a match afterwards."

"But my work?"

"It will be better for your work. You'll do more work this way. You'll start again like a giant refreshed."

"Do you really think so?"

"I am sure of it."

It was what he wanted to do, and he consented to do it. Next day all went merry as merry could be; in the morning, against her, he drove one of the longest balls of his life; in the afternoon he beat his man to smithereens. Mabel had returned by train, leaving the car at Sunningdale to bring him home, and it brought him home smiling and happy; and he had such a romp with the children as never was.

Women generally, it would seem, derive much happiness from their faculty of living in the moment. They possess this faculty in a much higher degree than men. They do not think that they might be elsewhere, differently employed, in other company, half their time as men do. Even in moments of pleasure men are always inclined to look forward or backwards. That phrase, "How happy I was then, if I had only known it," is used ten times by men for once by women. A woman knows when she is happy, and if at such times she speaks of the future, it is nearly always in recognition of the present fact—"Let us do this again some time. Bring me back here one day. We shall never have a greater treat than this."

Mabel had this power of present enjoyment in very full measure, and by reason of it she broke her husband of old bad habits of wandering attention and inappropriate reverie. She made him do his day-dreaming in unoccupied hours, and not when he ought to be the eager recipient of fresh and varied incoming impressions. Because of her lively interest in the external panorama of life, he sympathetically refrained from retiring into him-

self while there were things outside him well worth looking at. He had always known how to work; but she taught him how to take a holiday—she taught him, too, that holidays do not necessarily belong to a fixed holiday season, and that half an hour is sometimes long enough to give one the true holiday feeling of rest and relaxation. And in doing all this she rendered him calmer, stronger mentally than he could have ever been, but for her.

He knew that it was so. But he loved her not only for benefits received, because she was the bland medicine that did him good whether he took it in large or tiny doses, but because he could not help loving her. She was the one desired companion. In the early days of their band-box flat, when a walk with her about the streets at dusk was such a treat; when they used to take omnibus rides on summer evenings; when they bustled through the lamp-lit shops on winter afternoons, buying things for home, things for the children, things to be hidden till Christmas Day; when they were so much younger and poorer, he might almost have dreaded increasing prosperity lest it should rob him of simple joys by a complication of machinery intended to manufacture pleasure. But now after nearly ten years it was all just the same really. In essentials nothing had changed. As if unconsciously trying to prove it, they gave themselves an omnibus ride now and then. The chauffeur ought to have an afternoon off, or Mabel's aunt wanted the car—anyhow, *they* did not want it; they walked down to the main road, got on the top of a bus, and went anywhere that the bus wished to go—to Liverpool Street Station, to Kennington, to Ealing Common. It was no matter. They were side by side, looking down at the world as though they had bought it and given it away again, chattering,

laughing, being happy. Other couples, much younger couples, perhaps sat near them doing just what they did, being happy as they were for the same reason—because they were fond of each other, because they had got away together, and because they knew that the omnibus seat was only licensed for two and nobody could squeeze in between them.

This is what marriage ought to be; this is all its mystery—companionship. There is nothing on earth that has any real value when compared with the value of companionship, and its highest and fullest manifestation is reached in a happy marriage. No companion can be to a man what his wife is—the other, better self to whom there is nothing that you cannot speak of; for whom you must keep all your life clean and good, so that there shall never come into it something that you cannot speak of.

Not unnaturally, then, the calm joy of home-life reflected itself in his work, and the sanctity of wedlock that he felt and blessed he was impelled somehow to express. The critics paid him compliments about it. Time after time they said the same sort of thing—"Mr. Vaile's simple theme is sane and sweet; One may rely on Mr. Vaile at least for a healthy outlook; The atmosphere of Mr. Vaile's plays is always wholesome to breathe." He liked it, and did not mind how often they said it. As he tittuped along the Row on a well-bred hack, he thought of such compliments from Mr. Walkley, Mr. Archer, Mr. Maxwell, or other eminent critics, as feathers to wear in his cap; and he was proud to wear them.

He had two well-bred hacks that stood at livery in Park Lane all handy for the Row, and sometimes he sent them out into the country, and, overtaking them in his car, had a ripping scamper. By these means, together

with the fun of lawn-tennis and the agony of golf, he kept fit and retained his figure.

Thus Bryan considered himself the most fortunate of men. Work that is an amusement done in order to amuse; love of wife, love of children, love of home; little games at tennis, little talks in the club, little rides a cock horse—such small things, all of them; but enough. To be happy—what more can life give?

VII

ALL round them in the Regent's Park there was a colony of prosperous artistic folk—people who had long since arrived at the terminus of their early ambition, and who were not frightened by thinking of poor Mr. Clarendon Pirkis and his crowd coming after them in the next train; and the Vailes knew all these neighbours. Madame Nathalie St. Cloud, the famous contralto, had a house near; and Claude Rivett, the novelist, and Miss Clarence, the actress, had houses at no distance away. Sir Ronald Vince, the Royal Academician, lived next door, with the blank wall and high studio windows of his red-brick mansion abutting on the Vaile's tennis-courts; and the windows were not so high but that tennis-balls found their way in by them. Moreover, the children's kites would catch on the window-bars; while now and then Bryan, practising chip shots and happening to make as clean and sweet a hit with his mashie as he did with his plays, sent a Midget Dimple or a Heavy Why-not bang through the glass.

The most friendly relations subsisted between the two families, the young Vinces being conspicuous among Bryan's courtesy nephews and nieces; but when such an accident occurred their father always wrote to Bryan in the third person. "Sir Ronald Vince presents his compliments to Mr. Vaile and gives notice that next time missiles which destroy the comfort and endanger the lives of himself and his models," etc., etc. Bryan used to hurry

round and apologise personally for the accident, and promise that it should not occur again. And it did not occur—not until next time.

Sir Ronald was still busily engaged painting classical Italian pieces like old-fashioned drop-scenes, and organ-grinders and tambourine girls were always going to him as models.

Just across the road there was another painter, an A. R. A., who painted cattle in the snow, and had been doing it for thirty years. Sometimes he left out the cattle, but never the snow. He could paint snow in all weathers, knowing it so well that he did not need a single snowflake to remind him; but he had some arrangement with the butcher for keeping bullocks and sheep in his unused stables, and thus refreshed his memory of "Steers out on Ben Nevis" or "The flock camming haim to Kittle Brig." The young Vailes were assiduous visitors to the artist's stables until little Nancy almost broke her heart by discovering that when Moo-Moo left Mr. McCallum's hospitable outbuilding it was for the slaughter-house, and that, for all one could say, she might by now have eaten a nice slice of her favourite up in the nursery at home.

Bryan, after he had finished writing a scene that had given him great trouble, would dash across the road to read it aloud to this old Scotsman, who put down his palette, lighted his pipe, and listened attentively. He never by any chance went to the theatre, he knew nothing whatever about literature, but he was enormously valued by Bryan, first as an outlet for blowing off steam, and secondly for his infallible criticism. Bryan, after excitedly reading the scene, waited with anxiety for McCallum's verdict on it.

"I'll be verra frank with ye, Vaile. 'Tis not by any

manner of means your best stuff. For myself, I don't like it."

And the public did not like it either.

Or McCallum said, "Your endeavour has been to show the emotion of a young woman under the influence of love? Well, I think ye've succeeded verra well."

It seemed to Bryan that McCallum was always right.

Madame St. Cloud, the contralto, put them in touch with other singers, with composers, with pianists, with concert managers. She was one of Enid's godmothers, and she gave her godchild a golden cup and platter that would have been worthy of a princess. Generous, large-hearted, expansive, she would give anything away in sunny moments, and when angry she would give herself away, as the saying is. Bryan once nearly forfeited her friendship by reason of her touchiness and his own stupidity.

Somebody had said that Miss Noakes, the Australian soprano, had made twenty thousand pounds in the year; and Bryan, wishing to be polite, knowing that, whether regrettable or not, that ugly standard of cash received is admitted among musicians as a gauge of artistic merit, blundered out that twenty thousand pounds was nothing to make in a year and he was sure Madame St. Cloud made it in a month. Whereas he ought of course to have said she could make it in a week.

"Oh! Ha! Zat is droll. Oh, my God, too droll!" She had sprung up from her chair with a strident cry, which she tried to turn into a laugh but could not; and Signor Dannielli, who had come with her, got up too, looking frightened. She was appallingly angry. As she faced Bryan he saw her real complexion, quite red, beneath the other one. "Yes, Meester Vaile, perhaps once 'was I so ill-paid as you say—but zat vas long ago. I had

my beginnings—vich I veel not 'ave you to sneer at. Who are you—I like to know—to say my voice in thirty days shall bring me so little now? Insult and sneer. My God—if Dannielli was a man and not a greening monkey, he would slap the upstart that can insult Nathalie before his face. . . . *Suis-moi*—poltroon.”

Dannielli did not slap Bryan, but it was all very painful while it lasted.

Next day, however, Madame St. Cloud came back, with a bouquet of flowers for Mabel and tearful prayers that Bryan would make it up and be friends again. She had been at fault; it was her *tempair*. “But I lovv Brianne,” she vowed. “That it was which hurt. Cruel sneering words from those you lovv hurt you here,” and she put her hand to her large bosom. “They cut the heart. Enough. That he will accept this I beg”; and she would have given Brianne the big emerald brooch that she wore at her neck, as a keepsake and mark of esteem.

Among their writing friends there were several valiant women, breadwinners, supporters of families; and these Bryan held in high respect, paying them great deference and attention whenever they honoured his house with their presence. One of them had been Mrs. Wilding, the novelist, who maintained her feeble husband to the very end. Wilding was worse than useless, because he not only spent her earnings on himself, but squandered them in ridiculous speculations—setting himself up as a laundry, a servants’ agency, what not. Mrs. Wilding poured out novels, and they had an immense circulation, but nothing would suffice. Mabel said she was killing herself, and had a great contempt for Mr. Wilding, who really adored his wife in his feeble way. He was a thin man, with sloping shoulders, drooping moustache, and

watery blue eyes, and you only had to look at him to be absolutely certain that any business he touched would go to pot. He told them of a new scheme, and Mabel and Bryan both said, "Don't touch it."

"But I must do something for Nita," he bleated. "Nita—poor pet—does so much. I am not pulling my weight in the boat."

It was pathetic to observe the chivalrous, tender manner with which Mrs. Wilding made the best of him, trying to show him in an amiable light, drawing him into the conversation if he seemed neglected.

"Cecil," she would call him across the table, "Mr. Vaile is telling me about Richard Pryce's delightful new book. We'll get it from the library, and you must read it to me"; and she smiled at him, and turned to tell her immediate neighbours at the table how when she was tired he often read aloud to her. "He would go on for hours at a stretch if I allowed him. He reads quite beautifully. His voice has a soothing quality, but he brings out every point."

Mr. Wilding blinked and simpered self-consciously, and kissed the tips of his fingers to her. "Nita darling, I can't hear what you're saying, but I know you're talking about me."

Then, when she fell dangerously ill, he sat at her bedside and read aloud to her and never even noticed when she died.

He told them about it, poor wretch, his face all streaming with tears. "Darling Nita had been dead quite a long time—so the doctor said. I had asked her if I could do anything, and she gave a little sigh, and whispered, 'Cecil, I'm so tired.' So I thought I'd better read to her, as I knew my voice soothed her. *Vanity Fair* it was—

one of her favourites"; and he wept and choked. "And I wouldn't spare myself. I read on and on, never guessing that I had lost my darling for ever."

They genuinely mourned for gallant, chivalrous, overworked Nita Wilding; and they were kind to the widower for her sake.

That other novelist who lived near them was notoriously unfaithful to his wife. Claude Rivett wrote fearfully sentimental novels—*Winkie-Blinkie-Wee (a child)*; *The Flower-bed of my Heart*; and so on—and he had not therefore any excuse for his escapades. He could not say that he had gone in search of "copy." Indeed, when he returned from an unlicensed excursion he was more sickly sentimental with regard to subject and treatment than ever.

Mrs. Rivett, a well-favoured youngish woman, was very dignified always, not appearing to know anything about it, although one might suspect that she guessed the truth, until she broke down unexpectedly and opened her heart to Mabel. And after confessing her trouble she made a habit of coming for consolation to Mabel. "Oh, Mrs. Vaile," she would cry, "I know he is in love again. He is going to leave me." And he did.

Later on Rivett surprised Bryan by saying gloomily, "Vaile, my wife, I understand, has blabbed about my temperament. Well, I'd like you to know it's all true—it's all so horribly true." And after this he used to come and confess to Bryan. "I am going to leave her again. I know I shall."

It was impossible to treat them seriously. One day they were both having heart-to-heart talks at the Vailes'—one of them with Mabel, the other with Bryan; and they walked home together arm in arm. But one had enough of their domestic troubles, and the Vailes were

not sorry when they left the Regent's Park and went to live in the country near Godalming. The whole thing was lapsing from the absurd to the sordid; ill-natured people said, towards the end of their residence in London, that when Mr. Rivett was on the point of running away with anybody Mrs. Rivett invited the lady to come and stay with them for a long visit, and thus kept him at home.

From Godalming, where the three of them had settled down comfortably, Rivett launched not a novel, but a book about the Higher Life which surpassed anything for its sentimentality. In this work he described how, if you walked about the grass with bare feet, as well as being good for your health, it set you in tune with the whole universe; you and the sunrise became all one; the beautiful thoughts inside you and the beautiful flowers outside you mingled their pure fragrance; and your soul—if you kept on doing it morning after morning—became like a lofty temple with many windows, or a deep stream swelling towards the sea, or the all-embracing ether through which the eternal stars shine bright. This was the book which the publishers advertised in such a sensational manner as *A New Revelation; A Challenge to the Churches; The Triumph of Spirit over Matter*—"Mr. Rivett tops his own record. *Winkie-Blinkie-Wee* beaten. Thirty-seven editions called for in six weeks."

It was known that the Vailes were at home and glad to see their friends on Sundays, and these Sunday gatherings became a popular institution in the booky, stagey, canvassy world to which they belonged.

In English society, before the great upheaval, no doubt a few people used to be hospitable from ulterior motives, but the majority entertained their friends for the pleasure of entertaining them—that is, for the pleasure they

themselves derived from the entertainment. They did not act from any unkind spirit or a desire to make others suffer. If one could have had a party without having guests, they would willingly have let the guests off. And they did not shrink from suffering in their turn; they generally played fair, and wouldn't attempt to escape when the guests claimed their revenge.

But truly there was nothing of this sort about the Vailes' Sundays. People would not have come again and again if they did not like it; they asked to be asked, and turned up without asking. By tea-time on a warm July Sunday there would be sometimes as many as a hundred and fifty or two hundred people in the garden, and the policeman outside the house had more carriages, cars, and cabs than he could comfortably deal with. Stiff tennis, with the best players, was in full swing; and rows of guests sat upon benches watching the game, and moving their heads as regularly and rhythmically as if it had been Wimbledon. Ladies and gentlemen not in flannels but dressed in conventional town garments amused themselves, without tearing their petticoats or bagging the knees of their trousers, by playing mild golf with putters from hole to hole all round the garden. Groups in red-cushioned armchairs sat under the trees at the neatly arranged tea-tables, and there was a standing crowd at the long buffet under the verandah.

Naturally the theatre was well represented. The great stars often looked in—Miss Tarrant, saying she was sixty and looking sixteen; dear Mrs. Sutherland, flashing like a pretty dragon-fly in the sunlight; Sir Luke, wearing an inconspicuous white hat and a just discernible purple orchid; Sir Bevis, sometimes brave of aspect, but always kind of heart; Sir Launcelot, the princely leader of his profession, the brilliant wit, the staunch true friend, the

splendid comrade who too soon now was to vanish from this and all other earthly gardens—and one may imagine the delight of Miss Kate Ridgeway, of Mabel's country cousins, of young admiring girls and boys, at seeing them close by, off the stage, smiling, talking, drinking tea. Beyond these big lights there were youthful actors and actresses—pretty young ladies these, wonderfully attired, who strolled about in twos or threes giggling bashfully, or fell victims to elderly anecdote-telling gentlemen at the buffet, or, seeking a moment's solitude, furtively powdered their nice little noses somewhere behind the hawthorn and the rhododendrons. The illustrious Miss Clarence was very often there, and the days she came it often chanced that Mr. Kelly Gifford dropped in also.

Miss Clarence always said that Bryan's plays had made her, while Bryan said she had made his plays; and they had known each other so long and their friendship was of such a cordial character that they used all their four hands to shake hands with and greet one another. Indeed, now that Miss Clarence was not quite as young as she used to be, Bryan kissed her as well as doing the double shake-hands. Mabel did not mind; and, what was perhaps more important, Mr. Kelly Gifford did not mind either.

Among the writers, the well-known journalists were much more like men of the world than the imaginative workers. They dressed better, with well-ironed top-hats and braided edges to their morning coats, and were compelled to take themselves a little more seriously because of the always increasing power of the press and the number of European statesmen that they had to keep in touch with. Some of them even wore frock-coats, knowing that they might be in Parliament at any minute now. When the two greatest journalistic chieftains came, only

a very few ordinary visitors recognised them; but the editors of the *Thunderer* and the *Avenger*—as those organs had been nicknamed—were even at this period almost too big to speak of openly. Like the inhabitants of Japan or Thibet with regard to their Mikado and Grand Lama, one knew one was ruled by them, although one might not know them by sight.

Music, even without Madame St. Cloud, had its regular and occasional representatives. Mr. Odo Mainz, the composer, with his wife and clever, charming daughters, came frequently, but never as frequently as his hosts would have liked to see him there, and he introduced to them all the talented continental song-birds and musicians who were visiting London.

And over and above all these more or less well-known guests each Sunday party had its background of the unknown, the innumerable people who had been brought to the Vailes because somebody didn't know what else to do with them. McCallum, A.R.A., brought his old spinster sister; Lady Vince brought droves of relatives; Sir Ronald Vince brought the artists who had begun the day by going to spend it with *him*; the courtesy nieces brought the young men who showed signs of wishing to be their *fiancés*; the young actors and actresses brought their mammas—not the actress's mother of comic literature, but the real unmistakable article up in town for a fortnight from Burnley or Truro. The bringers knew that it was a kind house and that the brought would be made welcome. Indeed, the hosts freely honoured such drafts on their hospitality. Bryan was assiduous in his attention to wonderful old ladies in lilac bonnets and black silk gowns, and walked up and down the lawn with tall Miss McCallum on his arm fanning herself with an ivory fan.

His step-mother had been once or twice to the Sunday parties, but she came no more. Last time there was a little rain and Mrs. Vaile, taking shelter, after unparalleled efforts had rallied three strangers to consent to play bridge with her. With difficulty Mabel found a card-table, and Mrs. Vaile made her victims sit down at it, sat down herself, and drummed the green cloth with her eager fingers. "But are there no cards, may I ask?" Servants, sent rushing up and down to search in every room in the house, brought cards at last—from the nursery, of all places. Mrs. Vaile counted the pack, found it incorrect, and threw the cards face upwards on the useless green cloth. They were the forty-eight of the Happy Family, not the fifty-two of bridge: "I'll trouble you for Master Bun the baker's son," and so forth. Mrs. Vaile left the party without waiting for the rain to cease.

Between tea-time and half-past seven the party thinned out; by eight o'clock all were gone, except those who were staying to dinner—if it could be called dinner. It was a more than informal, a free and easy, almost a picnic meal. One never knew how many would be at it. Sometimes thirty or thirty-five people were seated in the big dining-room; and the buffet having given place to small tables, an overflow of young folk were accommodated outside under the verandah. But Bryan always managed to collect some young people round him at his end of the dining-room, and Mabel carried the heavy-weights on her ample shoulders at the other end. Bryan's end was the noisy end, but in fact the chorus of talk was so loud from all quarters that Miss Ridgeway's shrillness could make no effect in it.

Really a surprising dinner-party, and yet so much enjoyed by all the diners; something that showed Mabel Vaile at her best and strongest as a severely-tried house-

keeper—for, often as one dreaded that there would not be enough food, there always was. "Man does not live by bread alone," said big Mr. Westerton gaily. "Pass me the bread." And there was no bread to pass to him. For a few moments it seemed as if the staff of life itself had given out; then more baskets of rolls revealed themselves on the lower shelf of a dumb waiter. Even the soup did not go round, until two further tureens of it were discovered cooling in the verandah. But the salmon always went round—round and round again; so that hungry and robust tennis-players could be observed having another turn at the fish after finishing their gooseberry-tart and cream or pineapple jelly. And the chickens never failed. Mabel knew that if you only give English men and women sufficient Surrey fowl and York ham they will never complain, and she laid in stock accordingly. She could always send her uneaten chickens to the hospital on Monday morning. For the servants it was simply a battle: they put down a barrage of light wines, and held their own as best they could; even stretcher-bearers were combatants; all formation of units was gone, plates were used as so many fighting plates without regard to services, and there was great confusion on the lines of communication.

McCallum, A.R.A., often dined on salmon, neglecting everything else, but regretting that it had come from the fishmonger's and not been pulled by himself out of a little pool that he kenned of in the stream that rins by Kittle Brig. It could not be as good; and he supported his opinion by adages, such as, "A bo't sawmon is not a catch't sawmon," or, "To taste your fish ye'll aye ha' to hook your fish." And Mabel laughed as if she had never heard it before, and said, "All the same, Mr. McCallum, do have some more."

The talk of the elders often ran on literature and art; the talk of the youngers was often sheer nonsense. "Does the successful revival of Sardou's play mean that there is to be a recrudescence of artificial drama?" "Where was Moses when the light went out?" Mr. Greville, the journalist, perhaps was telling the people near him anecdotes about two famous but very different authors, describing how Sir Watson Holmes drove his publishers mad—just when they were expecting copy for his great new serial—by laying all regular work aside in order to write pamphlets about somebody who was serving sentence of imprisonment for a crime he had never committed. Mr. Greville contrasted this inconsiderate conduct with Alfred Dugdale's habit of bursting into revolutionary fury just before the publication of each new novel, denouncing the Government, talking of the wild mob's myriad feet as likely to kick out everybody, and reminding Cabinet Ministers that, although the lighting arrangements of London have been modernised, there are still enough lamp-posts left for impromptu gallows. Mr. Dugdale's publishers were enraptured by his annual fury, which synchronised so happily with their preliminary announcements of his forthcoming novel.

At the same time Mr. Willie Eldon perhaps was delighting his neighbours with an imitation of a music-hall artist, Mr. Mainz was quoting poetry, Mr. Brown asking conundrums, Mr. Gifford reciting his quarrel with the County Council. And amid all the chatter and the laughter Miss Clarence, the actress, sitting next to Mr. Mark Thyme, the literary critic, was solemnly recounting to him early struggles and poverty that never existed; and Mr. Thyme, who knew that, however curious her past was, it had never contained any such things, was telling her to make a book about them.

"Oh, no," said Miss Clarence. "They are just nothing. Nobody would be interested."

"There I don't agree," said Mr. Thyme. "It is the simple pathos, the sincerity, that would appeal to all, high and low."

"Hallo," cried Bryan, overhearing. "Wasn't that a platitude?"

"Sounded like it," said somebody else.

"Oh, Uncle Bryan, do let's play platitudes—one round of platitudes."

They indulged in those absurd conversational games, which were, of course, the death of real conversation; and this was a game taught to them by Miss Mary Marjoribanks, that delightful writer and most delightful of women. She had invented the game after suffering greatly from bores who visited her and tried to talk cleverly because they knew she was clever. You had to say the tritest thing with the most sententious air, giving to each stereotyped thought the framework of words suitable to an entirely original reflection. She herself excelled at the game, but she was not there to-night to lead them.

"All right. Here goes. . . . To my mind, there is something very innocent and beautiful about youth."

"Yes, but age has its compensations."

"Are not those roses sweet to look at?"

"Oh, I say, that won't do. That's too thin. Try again."

"Well, I may be eccentric, but I confess I love the sight of roses as well as their perfume."

"Yes, that's all right. Your turn, Greville."

And so it went on until it reached the turn of Miss Clarence, who had somehow missed the point of it all and said quietly but firmly, "No, please excuse me. I

may be old-fashioned, but I don't like making fun of serious things."

"Oh, she has won!" cried a young lady.

"Yes, but she didn't mean it," said another. "It's cheating—to say it, not knowing you have said it."

"But why platitudes?" said Mr. Westerton, the essayist, in his jovial, booming voice. "Why not coruscations? Let us coruscate. Let us all be Bernard Shaw. One round of Bernard Shaws."

And he had the audacity to start a new game, attempting to simulate the gambolling grace with which this philosopher draws attention away from the profundity of his thought and the remorseless power of his logic.

"Go on. You begin, Westerton."

"Very well. All men hate their native country, and a patriot is one who is ashamed to say so."

"Hold hard. That won't do. That *is* Bernard Shaw, isn't it?"

"Not that I'm aware of," said Mr. Westerton, beaming.

"Oh, he *must* have said it. Anyhow, it's too like him."

"All right, then. I'll start again. The Ten Commandments were made to be broken, and the great thing is to break them without making a noise or hurting your fingers."

But the new game did not catch on. Perhaps it was too difficult—or too easy. It never went further than Mr. Westerton, and for a little while one heard him still playing it all by himself. "Virtue is its own reward, and the prize is not large; nor are there many competitors.—The difference between black and white is one of colour only.—The best place to carry coals to has always been Newcastle." And so on.

At Bryan's end of the table mere silliness had set in.

People were talking of a walk, or a bathe in the river, taken by Adam and Eve and Pinch-me. A clever young barrister showed his skill by some subtle cross-examinations, laying the embargo on you that in your replies you should not say Yes, No, nor Nay; Black, White, or Grey; Mr. or Mrs. Mr. Eldon did a sleight-of-hand trick. This end of the table was twice called to order for noise and frivolity. But the contagion spread; the nonsensical repetitions passed from one to the other, and before dinner was over even the venerable Sir Ronald Vince was himself engaged in trying to repeat without slip such farragos as, "She stood outside Sithers's fish sauce shop, welcoming him in."

It was very silly, and perhaps it seems almost sillier when one looks back on it, but, for all that, it was thoroughly amusing at the time.

After dinner some of the men strolled in the garden, making red moving spots of light with their cigars in the darkness under the trees, talking now seriously of things that interested them—books, plays, pictures, arrangements of harmonious sounds. If there was a moon some of the ladies were tempted out again also; and in the moonlight the garden was beautiful, seeming to be as large as a park, with deep, thick groves, and the mansion of Sir Ronald Vince rose high and splendid as a Gothic cathedral. Then people wished that one could really paint moonlight, or put it into printed words, or show anything like it on the stage, or translate it into orchestra parts.

And then perhaps from the open windows of the drawing-rooms came shouts, yells of mirth. It was Mr. Eldon pretending to be a Scotch minister of the little free kirk and delivering a sermon over the back of an armchair, and quiet old McCallum, A.R.A., and his spinster sister had gone into hysterics because it was so like sermons

they had heard when they were children at Craigellachie —“Yes, to the verra life.”

Or, even better still, there would come rolling through the open windows a burst of splendid melody; and all hurried back to the house. It was Madame St. Cloud singing. Mr. Mainz was at the piano, wagging his head in ecstasy as he played her accompaniments; and Madame stood by the tail of the instrument, facing her audience, facing the moonlit windows, challenging the nightingales, if there were any, to come and listen. It was Nathalie St. Cloud, with her head up, throwing the big banknotes of her glorious voice out of the windows, up to the sky, through and through you—singing as she never did in Mayfair or at Buckingham Palace—singing for love. And she sang song after song, anything you asked for, because she loved Brianne, loved Mabelle, loved all the world to-night.

You could not listen and not thrill to the song. She made Bryan feel that he would write a great play one day, even yet; she made his wife thank God for giving him to her, and the children, and this happy home. Old McCallum saw the sunlight on the snow-crested hills, and his sister heard the parting words of the bonny, bonny lad she would have married if only he had asked her. Young Vince, who couldn't be an artist, made up his mind that he wouldn't be a clerk in an office, but go into the army instead. The boys wanted to fly, the girls felt that they had wings already. The chauffeurs, footmen, or grooms of the waiting carriages crept nearer across the gravel, and forgot that it was late, forgot that they wanted a drink, forgot that they were domestic servants. Nobody, not anybody, who could hear her was not stirred and stimulated and for a little while changed.

But all things must come to an end. At last the guests

had departed—except the three or four men of the sort that never go, that don't require sleep, that cannot weary of talking. These would sit with Bryan in his room till the night was nearly over. One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock—and they were still at it. They had talked themselves back to the beginning of things, and down to the simple bed-rock of literary chatter. "After all, which really is most important: the thing you have to say or the way in which you say it?" "If you were being sent to prison for life, and might only take one book with you, which book would you take?" It was broad day when Bryan went upstairs to bed; another Sunday had gone and the pleasant working week had begun.

Such were his friends; a world of their own, scribbling, daubing, strumming, squalling, strutting, as the case might be, but alike in their indifference to all other worlds and in their satisfaction with this one.

VIII

PERHAPS, unconsciously to himself, his whole mode of thought had been narrowed by the exigencies of the area in which he worked or exhibited the result of his thought. If all the world had not become a stage, that vast portion of the world that cannot be shown on a stage tended to lose its value and substantiality for him. He looked at the universe with the playwright's eye; he thought of human drama as it develops itself within four, or rather three, walls, and does not ask for too many changes of scene; he suspected the devastating force of any passion that is perambulatory in its manifestations, knowing that for his special purpose it was useless and without importance.

The great events must be performed "off," and violent action should only be seen in a glimpse through an open window, or be heard in sounds that reach you through an open door. Then for a little while one talked in short sentences:

"See. That carriage and pair is running away."

"What is it?"

"Yes, there has been an accident."

Footsteps and voices on the staircase.

A voice: "No, don't take the body into the drawing-room."

Another voice: "Take the body into the spare bedroom."

Lady Alice (tensely, and very distinctly): "Mother said we were expecting a visitor."

But, after that, it was the mental effects one dealt with, not the brutal cause itself. A man of action thus necessarily became less real, less truly alive than a man of thought. He would require a cinematograph theatre to display himself. For the playwright, a general is a person in uniform who appears just before the curtain falls to give somebody the Victoria Cross; a politician, a statesman, or an ambassador is no good except for a touch of eccentric character; an opulent stockbroker is the strong, silent man of a four-act drama who marries a peer's daughter, and, after accepting in silence numberless snubs and rebuffs from her, finds a voice, and a most stentorian voice, at the end of the third act, to tell her exactly what he thinks of her.

Till now Bryan had not been troubled by any thoughts or self-questionings as to the unreality of literary work. But now, early in the year 1914—with the culmination of his writing life—he began to have doubts as to the worth of it all. It seemed to him too like a dream within a dream. His new play, *Penelope's Dilemma*, had achieved such a success as he had never had. When doing it, he had felt stale and written out; but it was received by the public as nothing of his had yet been received. It seemed to set them on fire with enthusiasm. His critics paid him the same kind of compliments, but on an incredibly larger scale. "Mr. Vaile has always been the apostle of pure and simple thought; now he has become an asset in our national life, and added to the wealth of our national treasury of great works. England may be proud of him. . . . This picture of home is like a breath of fresh air; thousands of British homes will be the better for it."

Yet the fresh air did not reach him himself or blow away his staleness. The compliments in the press, the

letters from strangers, the box-office returns, the contracts for America, did not stimulate him as they should have done. He could not get on with his autumn play, and those thoughts about reality or unreality were always returning to him—especially after his talks with Alton Grey.

Alton Grey was of a type different from that of Bryan's other friends. He was one of those splendidly healthy and noble-minded men that you are forced to class as cranks because of the wild, or at least unsound, ideas that take complete possession of them. It was perhaps natural that, as an old soldier, he should follow Lord Roberts in his bothering crusade about universal service; but he went further than this, believing that England was going to pot, and that its only redemption could be wrought by a great awakening. He believed, in spite of logic and common sense, that Germany, who had everything to gain by peace and everything to lose by war, meant some day to attack us. Lately, however, he had ceased to entertain this particular bogey, or, rather, it had been pushed into the background by the larger phantoms of the decadence of our race, the prevalent worship of false gods, the blindness and deafness to things that are permanently high and good.

Bryan tried to reassure him and exorcise his crankiness in this matter by reasoning and argument, telling him that he had himself nourished such ideas at one time, when passing through a phase of disappointment and disgust; but, taking a careful review of the situation a little later, he had seen that there was really nothing wrong. No. England was all right. A little over-crowded, suffering from over-prosperity, but that was a disease that never seriously hurt one; a little short of breath, now and then; giving too much weight to trifles, and certainly

cutting a rather sorry figure just at present in one respect—going round and round in circles like a half-mad dog, with this Irish question tied to its tail like a tin kettle.

But Alton, though trying to believe it, could not. His want of belief made him quote Rudyard Kipling—"Lest we forget" and "If England were but what she seems."

Bryan had so much respect and admiration for him that he would talk about it as long as Alton liked, and Alton, narrowing it all down, brought it to the personal point. "Anyhow, I feel it in myself. I feel I am going down with the rest. I don't want to be like the people I see everywhere"; and he would walk about the room excitedly, speaking of the City, of the West End, of the country, and the labouring classes; smug people in shops, fat men at the club; the upper classes, the middle classes, lower classes; all so abominably selfish and self-complacent; afraid of effort, of trouble, of pain—young men afraid to marry—young girls not afraid to marry, but afraid of being mothers; healthy men afraid of falling sick, sick men afraid of dying; everybody afraid of something, and, because of their fears, all of them doing so little; doing scarcely anything at all. "But you *must* do something. Only one life, Bryan, old boy. For God's sake let's do something in it and with it."

"Yes," said Bryan, "I often feel that myself."

"Oh, you are all right," said Alton cordially. "You have your work, your wife, and children. You are doing enough; you needn't trouble."

"Well, I am sure *you* have done enough, Alton."

It was this personal note that touched up Bryan and set him thinking. If Alton Grey woke up in the middle of the night, as he said he did, to think about life, and his own relation to it, in this distressing manner, was

there really something wrong with our modern system; was being a playwright, and keeping the pot boiling—however large the pot—sufficient for a man's life-work; was it really doing anything at all? If Alton refused to be satisfied with himself, could he, Bryan, be satisfied with Vaile, the prosperous author?

He thought of Alton's distinguished career as a soldier; of his travels all over the world; his yacht-racing and his big game shooting; the political missions to distant countries on which he had been sent as military attaché; his philanthropic work; something to do with hospitals; something to do with the prison system—he had seemed a man of untiring energy, always doing something with the utmost vigour. He thought of his opportunities of judging people; he went everywhere, he knew everybody, and was greatly liked by all.

Bryan was devoted to him; he was extraordinarily well read, full of enthusiasm for the best kind of art, bubbling over with fun and good nature, and the very best playmate that you could possibly find for a long summer's day. They played golf together sometimes, and Bryan enjoyed it so much that, with him, he never cared whether he won or lost. He thought now of visits to golf-links within reach of London, and again he had that picture of Alton as a fountain of energy; a force so active that the two rounds of golf seemed in one's recollection submerged in a sea of lively episodes. In the train Alton met friends or long-lost relatives. At the end of the journey he saved a child from being run over at the level crossing. On the way to the club-house he arrested a fly-driver for flogging a wretched under-fed horse, and took the culprit and the whole conveyance to the local police-station. On the course he made his hulking, oafish caddy promise him to join the territorials. He drove into

the couple ahead of them, ran forward to apologise, and made two friends of them instead of enemies. He threatened to punch the head of the man behind them for hitting off before he had played his third shot, and then, after a tremendous quarrel, made a friend of him, too. At lunch he gave a hospital ticket to the waitress, and discovered that the waiter was the nephew of the butler of his father's land agent—he was doing something outside golf all the time. Surely he must always have got at least twenty-four hours into every day. What more could one do?

"If the world's wrong, Alton, one can't put it right," said Bryan at last, using the stereotyped words that indicate a no-thoroughfare of thought.

"No," said Alton, "but one can refuse to let oneself be covered in moss." And he laughed and stretched himself, and walked about the room again. "I don't want to be moss-grown. Bryan, I am older than you; I am nearly fifty; if I let the moss begin to settle, I shall never get it off."

And in one of their talks he returned to his old suggestion of doing something adventurous with Bryan as a holiday. "Let's get right away from it for once—Scotland—Norway—I don't care where. It will do us good."

But the autumn drama.

"Well, after you have finished it. June, or July, or August. Your Missus would let you go. She thinks just as I do. Is it a bargain?"

"Well, perhaps. This year or next."

And Alton Grey laughed. "You old rotter! I shall talk to Mrs. Vaile. You want shaking up. The moss will be all over you by the time you get to my age."

And some sort of bargain was made between them. Bar accidents they would go somewhere and do some-

thing for the good of themselves, if not for the good of the world at large, before the summer was over.

Bryan's autumn drama was not for Mr. Gifford and Miss Clarence, but for another management. *Penelope's Dilemma* would keep his old friends going for this year, next year, and the year after, if the experts were correct in their forecast.

Still stirred up by Alton Grey, Bryan thought of his increasing good fortune, and the duties that it brought with it. One ought to do something with one's money as well as clothing and feeding oneself and one's household. One ought to be more charitable. He acted tenderly and foolishly with regard to several begging letters that should have been thrown into the wastepaper-basket with all the others. He subscribed in a more handsome manner to the Royal Literary Fund. He sent a fairly large cheque to Lord Knutsford for the London Hospital, and founded the Mabel Vaile bed at a home for incurables. And he asked Mabel if she would like to lend some money—a nice substantial bit of money—to her father. Mabel was deeply touched by this suggestion, and gave it very careful consideration, but decided that a loan would do Mr. Gresley harm and not good.

Bryan had, of course, meant gift when he said loan, and Mabel knew that he meant it, and was as much touched by his delicacy as his generosity.

He asked her if she could do with any money herself, or was there anybody else who could do with it, and she said, "No," quite decidedly.

He thought a lot about his children in these days, and especially about his son. His duty to Jack must be performed. He must soon begin to shape Jack's future for him. Jack must be a good man; but what else? Not a playwright; something solider, something more substan-

tial, useful to mankind. But what? England was so over-crowded. The choice of a profession for Jack would not be easy.

In May, when their Sunday parties began again, he found them less amusing than last year. Their size, even at this early period of the season, bothered him, and he began to dread that they would expand dangerously. The numbers of people brought showed a tendency to rise. Perhaps it was the enormous success of *Penelope's Dilemma* that sent up the percentage of the brought. He discussed his fear with Mabel, and asked if she saw any means of keeping the Sunday parties under control. If they grew too big they would have to be given up altogether, and that seemed a pity.

Mabel thought it would be a great pity. She saw that he was not quite himself, and she advised him to get away with Alton for a few days now. This, however, was impossible. She herself had to go away once or twice for a night or two at a time. In sickness and in sorrow her relatives either went at once to her or demanded that she go to them. Now it was an old lady in Wales—one of those people near Llandrindod—who was in the worst kind of trouble; not long for this world; as Mabel said, requiring kindness probably for the last time.

He sent his horses down to the New Forest, and went for a little riding tour by himself, spending three days hacking through the woods and over the heath; and when he came back to London he was all right—that is, able to get on with his task. Though it was not easy, he stuck to it resolutely. Reality or unreality, this was the work that lay before him, and he meant to finish it. He worked slowly; then began to make a little faster progress. The garden was looking at its best; the children were well;

Mabel had answered the call of her relatives, and was **happy** because she had done her duty. He shook off all his doubts and worrying thoughts. The crisis had passed: Bryan Vaile was himself again.

IX

MR. AMBROSE LAKE, the art critic of a big newspaper, was also known as an expert witness in law cases, a guardian or trustee of museums, and the writer of horrid little books about Reynolds—the text of which he used first in his famous weekly articles. People said that his books were written by a ghost; but that must be wrong. No ghost could write so badly—not even the disembodied spirits that write messages at *séances*. Mr. Lake went to weddings, funerals, public banquets, and dined regularly at the Guildhall, the Academy, Downing Street, and other exalted places, as a representative of Art and Literature combined. This saved one place at the dinner-party, but it was no economy in food, for he always ate enough for two.

He had wonderful power over persons of quality; and, just as a conjurer produces live rabbits out of his hat or other unlikely receptacles, so Mr. Lake in the middle of a private view or on the staircase of a theatre would produce peers and peeresses, introducing you to them, then standing aside and smiling blandly, as though saying, “Yes, isn’t it wonderful?” or, “They are alive, but don’t be frightened. They are quite tame. They will eat out of my hand.”

Thus, in the Regent’s Park garden, one Sunday afternoon of June, on a patch of gravel in front of the verandah, he produced the beautiful Duchess of Middlesborough.

“Your husband and I are very old friends,” said the Duchess, shaking hands with Mabel.

She had another lady with her, and presently they and Bryan were all three strolling round and about the garden.

Meantime Mr. Lake had drifted off, and he was here, there, and everywhere, meeting so many friends and acquaintances, and telling them all that he had just arrived with the Duchess of Middlesborough and was soon going away again with the Duchess of Middlesborough.

The Duchess of Middlesborough—the name flew about before her and behind her and all round her; it was on everybody's lips. "Where did you say? *Here?* . . . Who says so? . . . With Mr. Vaile. . . . You saw her yourself? . . . Down at the tennis. . . . Oh, I must have a peep at her."

The knowledge that she was here, in the garden, fluttered and excited the party, breaking up its habits and customs, almost disorganising it. People who liked sitting lazily under the trees got up and walked briskly; people whom tennis bored suddenly grew interested in the game and wished to watch it; people putting at golf found the holes they were aiming at unexpectedly hidden from them by a crowd of promenaders. Wherever Vaile led these new guests he was passed and repassed by animated groups of walkers who pretended not to be looking hard at his duchess.

"Have you seen her? . . . Yes, twice. . . . I haven't seen her yet. . . . Mr. Lake says they won't stop long. . . . Gone back to the tennis? Thank you."

It was not because she was a duchess—that could not have so fluttered them. It was because she was *this* duchess. She was the one they knew about—the one whose photographs they had been seeing in the newspapers and buying at the shops for such a long, long time—the one that was talked of, and thought of, too, whether you

wished to think of her or not. She was the lovely, illustrious, and perhaps naughty, lady who could set the fashion merely by refusing to follow it, who did things that you and I cannot do—even if we wished to do them. Everyone over the age of twenty, knowing so much about her, was naturally curious to look at her; and the boys and girls, knowing nothing, looked because she was so jolly well worth looking at.

She stood in the crowd by the buffet now, and she drank a cup of tea. Old Sir Ronald Vince talked to her, asking if that poor piece of his—*The Festa at Baveno*—still hung in the music gallery at Kirkbride Castle. She delighted Sir Ronald by her reply, and Bryan wondered if she really had the faintest idea where the *Festa* was hanging. Anyhow, Sir Ronald was more than satisfied. She pleased Mr. Mainz, too, by knowing him so well, and thanking him so much for arranging that concert for her last year.

She stood there, tall, slight, graceful, in a dress that you couldn't describe, in a hat that you couldn't buy, with a long gauze scarf round her neck that you wouldn't have thought of wearing; and there was nothing in the remotest degree like her in all the big garden. She seemed no older than she had been eleven years ago; but time had given her great dignity, if perhaps it had robbed her a little of charm; and she was certainly more beautiful. Her beauty might have raised a question then; there could be no question now.

Bryan introduced other people to her; but, of course, it was impossible to introduce all who wanted to be introduced.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Vaile. Thank you so much."

Bryan went with them to the front of the house, where her yellow motor-car was attracting an immense amount

of attention. All the other chauffeurs had left their engines to look at it. It was so big that it gave one the impression here, with such a restricted space for it, of being the royal saloon of a race-train that had broken away from its couplings and drifted off the line. Everybody seemed to get inside it—the chauffeur and the footman were somehow inside, but in a compartment of their own. The ladies sat in the back of it; Mr. Lake was on a seat in front of them, facing the same way, but he could turn round to talk to them.

“Good-bye, Bryan. You must come and see me.”

Mr. Lake waved a fat hand, the Duchess smiled, and without a sound of movement the great yellow saloon swam out into the roadway and was gone.

Bryan hurried back to the garden and was besieged by questioners. His Sunday party was settling down again after its excitement, but people continued to talk of the unusual visitor. They all seemed dull now, rather tired, and he noticed Mrs. Mainz yawning as if she had been kept up too late. Somehow it was as if Mr. Lake’s conjuring trick had after all knocked the heart out of the party. He and his apparatus had gone; he was doing the trick somewhere else by now; it scarcely seemed worth waiting. Nothing more could happen here.

People soon began to leave, and comparatively very few proposed to stay to dinner. Bryan, after bustling about and trying to keep things alive, obtained Mabel’s permission to change into flannels and play tennis. As only old friends were left, they would not think him rude or neglectful.

X

HE HAD started work comfortably next morning when a servant came to tell him that he was wanted on the telephone. "Somebody who asked for you, sir—not Mrs. Vaile."

In order to avoid being disturbed he had refused to have a telephone in his own room. The family, extensionless instrument was in a room off the hall with tables for hats and coats, and stands and cupboards for tennis rackets, tennis balls, golf clubs. The children were allowed to keep their gardening implements in a corner, but were not supposed to keep their toys here. Bryan came out of his work-room, interrupted, irritated, and, going to the telephone, asked in a crusty tone, "Who is it?"

"Hold the line, please, sir," said a woman's voice. Then after a long pause he heard another voice, faintly: "Is that—"

But his wife and children had come trooping in, noisy although exhausted after gardening, and Enid dropped her hoe and Nancy let fall her watering-pot.

Bryan began to bellow. "Who is it? I can't hear. Oh, stop that noise! Do turn the kids out, for goodness' sake!" Then, in comparative silence, he lowered his voice. "Oh—the Duchess of Middlesborough?"

"Is that you, Bryan? Yes, I'm Diana."

"Yes, I am sorry I couldn't hear."

"I want you"—he recognised her voice clearly enough now—"to come and see me. When can you come?"

"The fact is," he said, "I'm so busy. Trying to finish something."

"But, first of all, I want you to do me a favour."

"What is that?"

"To speak for me at a drawing-room meeting."

"But I don't speak," he said. "Not ever. I am simply hopeless at speaking."

"Oh, that doesn't matter"; and he heard her off-hand tone and little laugh. "That's no objection at all."

He stood there with the receiver at his ear—and the years had gone. This was happening eleven years ago.

He listened to what she said; and then, lamely, he tried to avoid any appointment, conscious, while he spoke, of clumsiness and fatuity. He did not want to see her again, or to have anything whatever to do with her. Not because he dreaded her; she was not of the very slightest consequence; and yet from deep instinctive loyalty to his wife he must avoid her. But it was horribly difficult, without seeming to imply that she was making undesired advances, that is, trying to resume a friendly intercourse that she ought to have known had become impossible.

"Bryan," she said, "I really want to have a good talk with you. Come to luncheon any day except Saturday. Or after luncheon—before three. Come soon."

He replied blunderingly. "I will, if possible. Thank you. But you must excuse me," and even as the words came he hated them. "Excuse me"—like a tradesman talking about some goods that he has failed to supply—"excuse me if I can't. I am so hard at work just now—trying to complete something. And I find it takes so much longer than I thought"; and he paused. She remained silent. "I am doing a play for this autumn"; and he paused again. "Hullo! Are you there?" Silence; blankness. The fools had cut them off in the middle of a con-

versation. But then he understood. No, it was Diana who had cut them off. She must have hung up the receiver after giving her order, "Come soon." That was so like Diana. But he felt glad that she had not listened to his blundering excuses.

Mabel, since she banished the children, had been standing by the open door, and she followed him to his own room.

"Was that the Duchess of Middlesborough?"

"Yes."

"What did she want?"

"Wanted me to speak at a meeting."

"Did you say you would?"

"No—not likely."

Mabel had been interested by the Duchess yesterday, just as everybody else had been. She was still interested by her.

"Did you know her very well, Bryan?"

"Yes, but I did not know her very long. I lost sight of her when she married."

Mabel sighed tolerantly. "She couldn't have been a really nice girl, or she wouldn't have got such a name. I suppose one must believe."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she is very rapid, isn't she?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, my dear girl, how do I know, and what on earth does it matter?"

That rather vulgar slang term "rapid" jarred on him. Yet he had used it often enough himself.

"Well, *Tom-tits* said it quite openly, and they never brought a libel action."

"Possibly because they considered *Tom-tits* beneath their contempt."

"But it has an immense circulation."

"More's the pity."

"Oh, you must never be ungrateful to poor old *Tom-tits*. Remember their splendid articles about you at the time of *Evelyn Lestrangle* . . . Oh, those children *have* made me so hot"; and she sat down, fanning herself with a handkerchief. Indeed, she looked flushed and warm. Her broad, kind face was flushed, her hair was disarranged—the white blouse had puffed out of her waistband on one side.

As soon as she left him alone he returned to his work. But he could not work. He had been interrupted, put out of his stride, and the little conversation with his wife had enervated him.

It would be more than unjust to her to be irritated because *Tom-tits* was an utterly asinine and atrociously vulgar rag; yet the thought of it irritated him. Its subtitle! "We are only Tom-tits—the biggest of us." A copy of the thing was lying on a table; he picked it up, opened the buff cover, and turned the pages. *Mrs. Wren on Taxation*—leading article; *In the Nest*—domestic hints; *Picking up the Worms*—that was the city article. And the column of *Tom-tits' Twitters*! "The Tits ask: What was the state of mind of a certain countess who lives within a hundred miles of Hyde Park Corner when the jeweller sent the bill for sapphires to her instead of to her noble lord?" That was bosh, of course—but there would be real libels in the column if you hunted for them. He read it through. There was no libel on the Duchess of Middlesborough this week.

For a moment he thought of her, so far removed from, so high above the chatter of, *Tom-tits*. In imagination he could see her, in a carefully shaded room of her palace, in one of her graceful attitudes; looking absolutely unruffled; perfectly dressed—so perfectly that you

did not know how; after no fashion, in the goddess robe that is for all time—so that Reynolds could have painted her like this—or Vandyke—or Lely—or Rafael—or Mr. Sargent;—and above all looking so cool—as if, when she sank down on a bed of flowers and moss after chasing for hours through the woods with her hounds, her pale cheeks were not red, her perfumed hair was not clammy.

He was completely put off his work. In the idleness and enervation that had befallen him he turned to a standing bookcase that contained useful books for ready reference. There was no *Peerage*, but he took out a Volume of *Who's Who*, and looked at the entry, "Middlesborough, Duke of."

"Married, 1903, Diana, daughter of late Sir Gerald Kenion." In 1903 Diana was twenty-one, and now it was 1914. That would make her thirty-two. Yes, that would be right; but she didn't look it. Her birthday was in the autumn, September or October—during their acquaintance a birthday had not come round. He had only known her in the late spring and the summer—he did not even know what she looked like in the winter, with furs and velvet cloaks and snow and cold winds—his memory of her only pictured her with gauze, delicate fabrics, sunlight, and flowers. Thirty-two some time this autumn.

The duke's recreations were entered as: "Yachting, shooting, hunting." And Bryan thought: "Evidently an original sort of fellow—strikes out new ideas for his amusement. Likes yachting best, since he puts it first, then shooting, and hunting next—or has he merely put them down in the order of their expensiveness? Lives at Middlesborough House, W.; and his telephone number is 3685412 Mayfair. Very interesting indeed!"

He jerked the useful volume back into its place, walked

to the window, and looked out at the garden. His room was hot, the sunshine had been pouring into it, and the servants ought to have pulled down the outer blinds; there was a faint smell of soot; as he watched, he saw two or three large smuts floating in the warm air; the kitchen fire was probably blazing, whereas, on days like this, the servants ought to be using a gas-stove for cooking. Such trifles can make one uncomfortable.

He was irritated—although with a vexed smile at his own unreasonableness. But dash all interruptions! Dash that snob, Ambrose Lake, for bringing her here because she was a duchess! And dash her impudence for ringing him up on the telephone!

He went out for a walk, to kill time till luncheon. He was bothered by the slight deception, or suppression of the truth, to his wife. Yet how otherwise could he have acted? From the beginning he had never spoken to her of his relations with Diana, and it was too late in the day to drag out that old history—which was concluded history, a dead tale, when he first set eyes on Mabel. Suppose he had said just now, "I was once engaged to her," his wife would not have been in the slightest degree jealous. It all happened before they two met. She would say, bless her heart, "But you liked me the best in the end. She is a thousand times prettier than I, but you liked me best. I don't envy her her duke. I got *you*." But ever afterwards she would return to the subject. "Tell me what she was like then—just the same? Didn't I seem very commonplace, almost plain, compared with her?" Her feminine curiosity, once aroused, would be ever greedy for further details. She would make him talk about Diana—asking him exactly what it was that he used to admire in her. And he did not want to talk about her. He never wanted to hear her name mentioned

again. He greatly resented her reappearance in his life.

But he could not help thinking about her; because this secret—the fact of there not being absolute frankness between him and his wife—bothered him so.

Two days after this Mabel was claimed again by her family. That old aunt in Wales was still dying, and now one of her nieces, the one who had been relied upon to nurse the invalid, had fallen ill; and, as usual in their difficulty, they had written to Mabel imploring her to come and help them.

"Surely," said Bryan, "they can find someone else this time?"

"No, I am afraid there's no one but me. Agatha is there, but she is so little real use—and she says she is obliged to leave them to-morrow."

"But how long is it going to last?"

"Who can say?" said Mabel sadly. "But you know I shan't stay away a minute longer than is necessary."

She added that she felt she *ought* to go, but she hated leaving him and the children. "Of course, if you really wanted me here I wouldn't go. You are always first. But they are so helpless, poor dears."

He said that he supposed she had better go, and she thanked him for his unselfishness; and they sat for a little while on the leather sofa in the work-room, he with an arm round her waist and she clasping his other hand and caressing it.

Next morning he and Jack went with her to Paddington to see her off. After they had secured a seat for her in the front part of the train near the luncheon-car, and bought her more illustrated newspapers than she could possibly want, there were last words about domestic

arrangements. Bryan was to put a notice in the papers saying that Mr. and Mrs. Vaile would not be at home on Sundays; the car was to be sent in for long-delayed repairs and overhauling; Miss Hignet, the governess, could be trusted implicitly to take care of the children. Miss Hignet would send a post-card every day. "And remember, if you want me, Bryan, you are to telegraph, and I'll come home by the next train, no matter what is happening. *You* are first."

Then it was good-bye; with Mummy and the boy very brave in the moment of parting, but both of them on the verge of tears. She stood at a window waving to them; and they ran along by the moving coaches, out beyond the great glass roof, to the very end of the island platform—watching her till they could see her no more, then watching the train, then watching nothing at all.

The little boy, turning round again, felt cold about the stomach and warm about the throat; and Bryan felt as if his sheet anchor—if the sheet anchor is the one that holds you steady—had snapped and he was all adrift.

In truth he wanted her now more than at any time. He was lost without her. Home was no longer really home; the coldness, dulness, and emptiness caused by her absence were always perceptible. He could rely on the wisdom of the governess, a most excellent young person, who was now charged with control of the children; but he himself ought to look after them a bit, and give them a little of his company. He said that he would take them for a treat to Kew Gardens one Sunday—if not this Sunday, next Sunday.

One evening, after dining at his club, he walked along Piccadilly and through Mayfair before hailing a taxicab to take him home. It was a lovely warm night, and

in the squares and quiet streets at this part of the town all the world was giving parties. There seemed to be carpets and carriage ranks outside the doors of every other house. At a well-known house at the corner of a square there was a party of the largest dimensions—a party that would have a column to itself in the *Morning Post* to-morrow—and he wondered if Diana's name would be in the list of guests. Perhaps she was there now. Perhaps she had just driven in at the gates and descended at the brightly illuminated perron. He passed the corner of the street which would take one to Middlesborough House, where she lived; but she would not be there at this hour, unless she was giving a party of her own. He looked up at the windows of one big house, all dark to-night—the house where he had first met her. That party had been nearly over when at last someone introduced him to her outside the dancing room, and he had scarcely said anything to her; yet in those few words he somehow must have told her that she had cast her spell upon him and that he was spell-bound. For she knew.

While he passed through this smart, frivolous, gaiety-loving world, he had a transiently uncomfortable sensation of being shut out of it all. With all these parties in full swing, there was not one to which he had right of admittance. So many were being made welcome at these fine houses—almost anybody, except himself. It was an absurd thought. For years he had been trying to keep out of such houses, had refused to enter them at any price.

He walked slowly, sauntering up one street and down another, in no hurry to get home, with nothing to go home for; and as he strolled along he thought of all the beautiful girls and women dancing, whispering, or looking with quick bright glances for the only person that

mattered—the person who would come looking for them. Recollections of his youth vaguely stirred him—recollections of youth in the abstract also. How strange it is—that time when girls are ethereal, wonderful, instead of just being jolly, healthy young creatures, admirable and pleasing, but with no more power to move you emotionally than a lot of young sheep or calves skipping round you in a meadow; when you almost faint at the sight of one particular girl in her party frock; when you go seeking, seeking to find her, only to touch her hand, catch a smile, or gain the smallest little secret sign of approval. It is just the glamour of youth; before love and the ideas belonging to love have taken any material or solid form.

Then, like a hot memory, adolescent, unworthy thoughts came back to him. He drove them away easily: they had never troubled him long. And he thought again of glamour—the glamour that grown men can create for themselves, out of their own imaginations, out of the poetry they have read, the pictures they have seen, the songs they have heard, and, above all, from that innate unreasoned longing for something better than the common order of things, for the supreme gift, the unattainable joy. How strong it had been upon him—that kind of glamour—in the days when, following Diana, he had wanted to go to houses like the one with the gates and the perron, because he would meet her there.

At home, sitting lonely in his room, he still thought of the past. The instinct that makes one weave fancies about ordinary facts and give transcendent qualities to ordinary people is, he thought, perhaps usefully ordained by nature to satisfy the other instinct that craves for the unattainable delight. But behind it all lies the cruel truth. There is something better, finer, that we might have had and yet always miss. It must be so. Other-

wise one would not have such a haunting feeling of it. Otherwise why should one feel from time to time, when one is quite alone and able to think clearly, that, although one may seem to be prosperous, successful, possessed of all one wanted, one has really gained nothing, but missed the chance of everything?

That peace and solid balance that his married life had brought him was already disturbed.

He had not allowed Lady Paramont to Paramont him by beckoning him from his seclusion in order to show him to her friends, and he was not going to be Paramonted by the Duchess of Middlesborough. He thought thus when remembering things said by Diana last Sunday of her admiration of *Penelope's Dilemma*, of his habit of hiding himself, of the number of people who would like to know him. But Diana was not Lady Paramont; she did not want to trot him out; she had asked him to go and have a good talk—evidently meaning a *tête-à-tête*.

He determined that he would not go to see her—would not even pay one call of politeness. It seemed, perhaps, rather rude to ignore her invitation altogether, but he could not help that. For eleven years she had left him alone, not caring whether he was alive or dead; not knowing either, unless she happened to see his name on a playbill; so why should she all at once begin to worry him, and why should he stand on ceremony with her in declining to be worried? Once, for a little while, he was inclined to go to Middlesborough House. He thought he would go in order to prove to himself that he was not afraid of her, to re-establish himself in his own mind, to get rid of the trouble for ever. But finally he decided not to do it.

Nevertheless, he happened to see her, without her seeing him. Dining at the Gridiron Club, he was asked to go on to the opera with a man who had two stalls but said he would not use either unless he could find someone to help him use both.

When he looked round the house at the end of the first act, and saw her in a box, it seemed to him that he had really known he would see her and had come there on purpose to see her. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. He had not thought of her once at the Gridiron Club. He had come because he loved music and was at a loose end.

He loved music, but to-night he did not enjoy it. This opera worried him by making him think of the dulness and flatness of his own work, and of the nasty way in which he had stuck again over his autumn drama. How poor a thing is a stage play of words only, when compared with what a play might be if you could set it to music. The scope of the great stage, the vastness of the auditorium, the splendour of the audience, combined to render the author of *Penelope's Dilemma* querulous. If English people really cared for the theatre, houses like this would be regularly devoted to the drama, instead of being opened only in the London season for opera. One of Shakespeare's glorious pageants would now be unfolding itself here—or some big modern work. If you had stages like this at your disposal, you could open out and expand large bold pictures of contemporary life, instead of making a little peep-show the size of a large cupboard and setting five or six people chattering in it.

For the most of the evening he was watching Diana in her box on the pit tier. She sat with her left shoulder towards the stalls, and she never looked round or down. There was another woman in the front of the box, who

gaped at the audience whenever Diana was not speaking to her, and there was someone else in the back of the box, to whom Diana spoke now and then.

Bryan saw her standing in the outer vestibule when the opera was done, but she did not see him. And again he had the illusion that all the years were wiped out, that this had happened ages ago and was mysteriously happening again. What had been her spell? What was her spell?

XI

RETURNING to his house late one afternoon, he saw her big, yellow motor-car standing at the gate. His heart beat and he felt almost sick—he turned and walked away. She had come. She was inside the house, waiting for him.

He turned again after walking a hundred yards up the road, came back to the house, and let himself in at a side door. Then he stood for a few moments in the hall. The door of his work-room was open, and her voice was sounding.

She was sitting on the leather sofa, with a volume of Hans Andersen open in her hands, and Nancy, his youngest child, on her lap. It was a strange picture—no detail of it escaped his notice: Enid, the elder girl, by her side, nestling close to her; Nancy's garden-stained shoes dangling against and dirtying the lovely material of her skirt. And Nancy had folded her little hands in the manner that always pulled some string of his heart. She did it when he first read aloud to her, after her illness.

"Well, at last," said Diana. "Bryan, what a time you have been. I was going to finish reading this tale and then give you up."

"But you haven't finished it," said Enid. "Finish it, please."

"All right. Daddy has kept us waiting, and he must just wait himself." And Diana read to the end of the story. Then she shut the book, kissed Nancy, and got up.

"I came to see your wife, but I hear she is away."

"Yes—in Wales."

"But they said you were coming back soon. So I waited. What's the time?"

"Six o'clock."

"Then I can't stop. You can drive with me if you like."

But Bryan regretted that it was impossible to do this.

"Good-bye, Enid. Good-bye, Nancy. Are you fond of your daddy?"

"Oh, yes."

"Is he a good daddy?"

"Yes, he is," said Nancy with conviction. "He's going to take us to Kew Gardens on Sunday."

"Is he? Kew Gardens. That sounds rather nice"; and Diana sat down, and looked thoughtful. "Who is going?"

"Enid and Jack and daddy and me."

"I should like to come too. The roses aren't over yet. Yes, Bryan, may I come with you?"

"Oh, yes, do come," said Enid.

"No, dear," said Diana very seriously. "Your father must answer for himself. Bryan, will you let me come too?"

"Of course, I shall be only too glad."

She laughed. "Too glad! Not glad—but too glad. Bryan, you are absolutely refreshing—you are just the same. Age cannot wither you, nor custom stale your charm. *How* do you write your plays? Your dialogue in real life was always pitiable, and I think it's worse than it used to be."

And he, too, laughed. The trouble was in him, not in her. Why should he fear her?

So it was arranged that she should join the Sunday trip. She said, "I really want to see the roses." At first

Bryan said that they would meet her at Kew; but as soon as she heard that his car was temporarily out of action she said she would come in her big car and drive them down. There would be room in it for all of them. If more were to be of the party she would bring a second car. They would have tea in the gardens. It would be ripping.

Jack, shy of visitors as all boys are, and Miss Hignet, shyer, if possible, than most governesses, came out of concealment, to see Diana leave the house; and Bryan and his family all stood in the roadway waving to her as she rolled away.

But afterwards Bryan began to think, began to know, that this would not do. Diana was a bore—and she was dangerous, dangerous to him. He revolted against her attempt at a capricious, idle intercourse. Let her fill her empty time her own way.

He asked the children if they would like to go to the Zoo instead of to Kew Gardens, but they did not care for the change of plan. Jack immediately accepted animals in lieu of flowers, but the two girls wanted Kew Gardens and nothing else.

"I did like the Zoo once," said Nancy; "but I *am* so tired of it."

Bryan revolted again—against the idea of their being prevented from going where they pleased, against his own desire to deal tenderly with the person who was trying to upset the original plan. He would fulfil his promise to his children; he would take them to Kew Gardens; and he would take them there alone.

On Saturday he sent a telegram to Diana—"Extremely sorry our Sunday arrangements are cancelled"—and he signed it with his surname.

Sunday was a splendid fine day, and they went down to Kew by train—daddy and Nancy hand-in-hand, walking to the North London Railway station, Jack and Enid prancing ahead, but rallying all together whenever they had to cross the road—the regular middle-class outing—the way they liked best—the perfect treat, if only dear Mummy could have been there too. They would trust to luck to pick up a taxicab to bring them home; but the train journey was part of the treat. At the station Jack displayed that profound knowledge of and exquisite delight in railways which all boys, as it seems, can acquire without the slightest aid or prompting. He told his father that, although the North London was the shortest railway in England, it possessed one real long business tunnel, and they were about to have the felicity of going through it; he further announced that electric traction would shortly be adopted on the line—that, in fact, the new rolling-stock was now being constructed, and it would be better than the drab-coloured Metropolitan trains and ever so much better than the red Districts.

Arrived at Kew, they did the pond and ducks exhaustively; then they did the big palm house, including its upper gallery; and then, in the fresh air again, on the other side of the palm house, among the roses, they came plump upon Diana.

She had a woman friend with her, and she was really doing the roses. He tried to dodge her, but could not; and she talked to him for a few moments only, about the roses. She was quite unruffled—not angry. But he felt an utter fool and rather a brute, stammering out something about the beauty of the gardens.

“Yes,” she said; “public gardens, you know—anybody has the right to come—and so large that it’s easy to avoid people. It’s bad luck your running against me.”

He stammered. "I ought to explain—"

"No, don't explain. The family circle! *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*"; and she spoke to her friend. "Gladys, look at these. *Jeanne Marie Cottier*—aren't they? Can you make out the label?" And they went on examining the flower-beds. He saw her stoop towards the clusters of delicate petals, her small face like a flower itself.

She turned as Bryan and his family moved away; smiled and nodded across the roses—so gracious and so fine, seeming to say to him, "How can you offend me or annoy me? You are less than nothing to me. You never were much more than nothing to me."

He was almost worried to death about the incident. In the hall at home he stared at visiting cards in a tray, moved them about until her card was uncovered—the card she had left for Mabel the other day. It was kind of her to pay that call. She had wanted to be friendly, feeling interested in them because she had known him years ago; thinking, perhaps, erroneously but kindly, that she might be useful to his wife; meaning nothing but kindness.

Next morning he rang her up on the telephone as early as he decently could, and asked if he might go to see her.

She said, "Come whenever you like. But what about the work you had to finish? Have you finished?"

"No. It doesn't matter."

And she seemed delighted—her voice sounding so sweet and frank to his ear. "You don't know how I shall love a real talk with you, Bryan. I have so much to ask you."

"So much to tell me?"

"No, nothing. My history has been quite uneventful."

"Has it?"

"Yes."

And they both laughed. The phantom had been exorcised. All *malaise* was gone. He felt that he was himself again—a sensible middle-aged man, not a fool.

As had been arranged, Bryan lunched that same day at Middlesborough House. He had never entered its dingy old walls before, and he was not attracted by the interior now disclosed to him. One could imagine that it might look grand enough at night when brilliantly lighted, with a crowd of finely-dressed women, and men wearing stars and ribbons going up the big staircase, with all the doors standing open, and music sounding above the murmur of all the voices; but by day it seemed dark and gloomy, its size seemed oppressive, and its splendour of decoration had the shabby air of an old pretentious fashion that has long since passed away.

If Bryan had described the dining-room in that terrible lingo of play-books which he, like all other dramatic authors, was compelled to write when preparing his work for publication in book form—a language of tradition, as is that of auctioneers' advertisements and pamphlets about new hotels—he would have had to say: All over the room there is a tone of settled magnificence and the pomp that long custom has robbed of ostentation. It is so big that the round table at which luncheon is served seems but an island in the ocean of floor space, a long table, without any table-cloth, stands like a continent beneath clustered golden hanging lamps. The luncheon-table has been drawn towards a bay at one end of the great apartment; and through the windows one can see a row of trimmed limes, now in full foliage, and placed there with the obvious intention of creating a screen to neighbouring houses. The seven or eight guests seat themselves

at the round table. The servants—men in sombre liveries and others in plain clothes—busy themselves with the service. A pleasant, easy conversation commences.

The guests had assembled in a library that looked out on the street, and there was only one person that he knew—Lord Bekesbourne. The rest of them were two pretty girls, addressed as Adela and Clarice; a big lady whose name he did not catch, obviously of great importance, quite a substantial pillar of society; Sir Somebody Something, a lame man with a cadaverous face, from the Foreign Office; and a young soldier called Geoffrey.

"The last time we met, Vaile," said Lord Bekesbourne cheerily, "was at Sir Launcelot's supper-party. Very amusing night, wasn't it?"

Bryan had sometimes thought of Bekesbourne as a typical instance of a man who always did what he liked and always liked what he did. Throughout life he had enjoyed himself, extracting pleasure from life itself as well as from the finer enjoyment that comes from the satisfaction of intellectual tendencies and cultivated tastes; and perhaps the only sorrow that had ever befallen him was the loss of a beautiful young wife. Very tall, thin, with a high-nosed, narrow face, he was as good-looking at sixty as he had been at twenty-five. He preferred the country to London, and in the country he owned one of the show-places of England; he was a judge of pictures, china, and old furniture, and being very rich he was also a collector of them; he dabbled in literature, and because he was really clever he had written what he called a Chapter of Napoleon's Life, which many people said was as good as Lord Rosebery's *Last Phase*. He had a charming paternal manner with women, and with very pretty women he showed exactly the same sort of admiration—and without any more reticence or disguise—that he

would have shown when examining a priceless work of art.

As they sat at luncheon Bryan observed both his fatherly manner and his unconcealed admiration in regard to Diana. He was telling her about the week-end party at a house he had left this morning, and she seemed to be mildly interested.

"They told me Mr. Brentwood and Mr. Jordan were coming. But who else was there?"

Evidently it had been a grand and carefully-planned party—in slang phrase, "a set-piece"—with Cabinet Ministers, pretty ladies, leaders of fashion; and, as one gathered from Lord Bekesbourne's account, it was precisely the sort of party against which *Tom-tits* would have inveighed most bitterly for its smartness, fastness, and prodigal waste of money. "The Tits ask: Did the minister for finance really think it consistent with the dignity of his high office and his own natural sense of the fitness of things to dance the tango on the lawn at 1 a. m. with a certain marchioness who is shortly to make a second appearance in the divorce court?"—and so on.

"It must have been great fun," said Diana.

And then Bryan suddenly felt rather warm and uncomfortable, because Lord Bekesbourne began to reproach her for having so cruelly chucked this party.

"It was a little severe, Diana, even for you. At the last moment, you know"; and Bekesbourne, smiling and paternal, looked at her black dress and her rope of white pearls, obviously noticing how the black of the dress contrasted with the delicate colouring of her face and heightened the flash and glow of her eyes—admiring her just as if she had been a piece of Chelsea china or a painting by Lawrence.

"I wired to them on Thursday," said Diana. "You can't call that the last minute."

"Why did you shirk it?"

"I shirked because I was so tired."

"Not ill?"

"Oh, no."

"What did you do with yourself on Sunday?"

"Read Dryden's *Ænead*, and in the afternoon went to Kew Gardens with Gladys Kemptown."

Bryan felt ridiculously guilty. Had she really been tired? Or could it be possible that she had thrown over her friends and abandoned all the delights of a highly-organised set-piece in order to take part in that little family outing from which she had been so boorishly excluded? He, indeed, had done the throwing over at the very last moment. Detaching himself from the young lady called Adela, to whose ingenuous prattle he had lent but an inattentive ear, he turned to his hostess with a deprecating and apologetic glance. She smiled, but did not seem to read his remorse or recall the reason for it. Set-piece or Kew Gardens—it was all nothing to her.

In spite of the abnormal success of *Penelope*, no one spoke of the theatre; and he was glad that they didn't.

But after luncheon, when for a few minutes they were again in the library, the big important lady took him in charge and told him all about his host and hostess. "You spoke just now as if you didn't know the duke? That is so? Sit down"; and with a half-formed gesture she indicated a gilt-legged but armless chair as what he was to sit upon. "Draw a little closer." She reminded him of another important personage, Lady Paramont; she spoke with the same sort of benign firmness, but she had not Lady Paramont's fascinating little touches of archness

and truculence. The substance of her communication was that the duke and duchess were very good friends, although they did not see a great deal of each other; they had not agreed to differ, but merely to go their own ways; and they kept up appearances; they were to be seen together on all solemnly public occasions; and every year they regularly spent about two months under the same roof, or deck, on the yacht. "*Amethyst!* It is a big vessel — really a floating home!" Bryan wondered why she was telling him all this, and with such an air of benignantly performing a duty. It seemed as if she had said to herself, "Here is a stranger, and it is my duty to take charge of him at once and prevent his putting his foot in it." Or, on the other hand, it might only mean that she had not been allowed to talk much at luncheon, and she was fond of talking. "The pity of it is," she said in conclusion, "they have no children. That, no doubt, was a disappointment to Hugo. The dukedom will go to his cousin, Augustus Pierpoint."

Then she got up. Everybody was going.

As the play-books would say: The party breaks up. Business of good-byes. The guests leave unobtrusively, with air of well-bred, fully-occupied people who take everything as a matter of course and do not make mountains out of molehills. They came here for nourishment, and they return to their avocations. Business of servants. Groom of chambers, or third under-butler, closes the double doors at back; and the stage is empty, save for Bryan Vaile and Diana Middlesborough, who stand regarding each other.

"Come into my room," said Diana; and she led him through the inner hall, past the foot of the staircase, to a room at the back of the house.

"I have seen *your* work-room, Bryan. This is *my*

work-room. It was Middlesborough's work-room—till he gave up working."

It was a lighter, nicer room than any that he had yet seen here—the chairs and sofas had chintz covers; there was some beautiful old French furniture; corner cupboards showed china behind the glass of their upper parts; and tables were loaded with all kinds of exquisitely pretty, enormously costly, and entirely useless things that had been given to Diana or bought by her herself. A large, rather clumsy writing-table and some bookcases filled with official-looking books suggested the labours of her husband, before he struck work. And no doubt it was he who had installed the full-length picture of Diana over the chimney-piece.

"That's Malmö's portrait, isn't it, Duchess?"

"I wish you wouldn't be so absurd."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, don't pretend to have forgotten my name. You said it suited me."

"Oh. You mean I am to call you Diana?"

"Of course."

"Well then, Diana, you mustn't let me waste your time. You'll be going out."

"Not till half-past three. And it's only half-past two now." She had settled down on a high-backed sofa, and with a graceful and fully completed gesture she told him to sit down by her. "Now, Bryan, I want to hear all your life since then—everything you have done."

"Is life what we have done, Diana, or what we have thought?"

"A little of both, isn't it? Bryan, were you unhappy when you wrote *Evelyn Lestrangle*?"

"No, not a bit. But I was unhappy after I'd written it, because scarcely anybody liked it."

"I liked it immensely. I loved it—every word of it. But I thought it had a touch of sadness that you haven't put in anything else"; and she went on talking of *Evelyn Lestrangle*, with an appreciative understanding that was very pleasant to him. The least conceited writers enjoy really intelligent criticism when it is also flattering, especially about their failures; they do not always think the adverse verdict of the public is quite the last word on the matter. But Bryan resolutely refused to talk about his work or to let Diana do it either. He said he wished to hear about herself.

"Well," she said, "I have done nothing. And what I have thought wouldn't interest you—any more. But I'll show you where I have been. Come and help me."

She crossed the room, opened the door at the bottom of one of the china cupboards, and displayed shelves with large leather-bound scrap-books.

"There. Bring these. Bring these too."

Bryan carried the books back to the sofa, and they sat side by side, with a book open on their knees. They were the sort of albums that Mabel and the children had at home, filled with photographic records of summer holidays at Whitby and Bexhill; but these were more solidly bound, all in the same style, with Diana's name stamped on the leather cover; the photographs were better prints; and Diana had been farther afield.

"Montenegro! That was three years ago." And she pointed to the royal palace at Cettinge—a humble kind of barracks where she had stayed for a fortnight.

"Trieste. Fiume. . . . This next book is all India."

"Did you go there for the Durbar?"

"Yes."

"Was it worth seeing?"

"India was—not the Durbar."

She showed him pictures of herself in various costumes on her wanderings—Diana dressed like an Arab woman; Diana dressed like a Serbian peasant; Diana dressed like a lovely Greek boy in ancient Greece; and Diana on an elephant, a camel, a horse; Diana receiving foreign admirals as they stepped on board the yacht; Diana talking to the Queen of Roumania at a military review;—each picture giving them things to talk of.

“Was that Lady Violet Kingsland?”

“Yes.”

“Do you ever see her nowadays?”

“Very rarely. She lives in Italy.”

“She was devoted to you.”

“Poor Violet”; and Diana shrugged her shoulders.

“Why do you pity her—for being fond of you?”

“Don’t be silly. I pity her really because she is quite contented. Her people made her marry a very stupid man when she ought to have married somebody else. There. That’s the port of Agadir—the place they had all the fuss about.”

He held the heavy book, and she turned its stiff leaves; and he watched her long finger as it pointed to the pictures, noticing, too, the thin blue veins on her white wrist. Each time that she stooped to examine a photograph more closely her shoulder touched his arm, and his face came near the dark waves of her hair. He was saturated by the atmosphere of Diana’s pictures and of Diana herself. Each minute more old memories that he thought were dead revived in him; all kind of things concerning her in the dim past, things that he would have sworn he had forgotten, recalled themselves vividly; and once or twice she stirred the zone of memory to its depths by speaking exactly as she used to speak to him long ago, in the same tone, employing the very same words.

"Don't be an old stupid, Bryan. . . . Look. This is Cashmere. I adored Cashmere."

"I thought women weren't allowed to go to Cashmere."

"Not all women—one or two women"; and she laughed. "I may go anywhere, whether it is allowed or not. Have you forgotten that? There's another book of India. Fetch it—if this doesn't bore you."

It did not bore him; but as he crossed the room a little toy clock on a table began to make a chiming music, and he looked at his watch guiltily. Over an hour had slipped by—it seemed impossible.

"Diana, it's four o'clock—and you said half-past three. Why didn't you turn me out? Good-bye."

She had risen from the sofa, and with a smile she offered him her hand.

"We are to be friends now, aren't we, Bryan; real friends?"

"You honour me too highly."

"Don't be an old stupid. You know what I mean. You hated me, didn't you? But you won't hate me any more?"

And without waiting for an answer she went out of the room. She was going up the staircase as he passed through the inner hall; and looking down at him, she kissed her hand to him, lightly, carelessly, just exactly as she used to do eleven years ago.

Outside the house her carriage stood waiting for her—a victoria with two well-matched, well-bred blacks; and Bryan wondered idly if she had ordered out her black horses to-day because she was wearing a black dress.

Well, that was all right. He had done his duty visit. They were all square now, and she had not asked him to go on with the game. Those words about being friends

really related more to the past than to the future; they meant, Let bygones be bygones. Only fatuous conceit could make one for half a moment interpret them as, Now let's begin again.

He strolled away, on the broad uncrowded pavements, through the spacious restful square, thinking of her—thinking of the little tricks or individual characteristics that helped to build up the spell: that lift of the eyebrows and the movement at the corners of her lips; her fearlessness; the something childlike about her that mingled with her elusiveness and inscrutability; those deeper tones of her voice that irresistibly stirred one up, in the same way that the notes of Nathalie St. Cloud's singing voice stirred one, automatically, making one vibrate to the unexpectedly sweet sound. The attribute of elusiveness had become less marked—he was sure of that. But the whole spell was there still—he was sure of that too;—in good working order, quite strong for all general purposes; and he understood that, because of mysterious inexplicable reasons, if he were silly and not holding himself in hand, it might still be deadly potent to him, Bryan Vaile.

XII

MABEL wrote to him from Wales nearly every day, and he read each letter two or three times. Poor girl, she was having a bad time. She had been away over a fortnight, and she saw no immediate prospect of getting back to him. She gave a pitiful account of her relative's situation—the old dame no better, the young cousin a little worse; distress, helplessness; no one to look after things except herself. She had not the heart to leave these afflicted souls in their trouble, but her last letter showed how much she was suffering from homesickness.

On the impulse of the moment Bryan wrote to her suggesting that he should run down to Wales for a few days to cheer her up, and asking if there was any inn near her aunt's house where he could get a bed.

But to this suggestion Mabel replied that, much as she would like to have him with her, his absence from home would make her anxious about the children. She trusted Miss Hignet absolutely, but the knowledge that he was at hand, in case of any little untoward occurrence, made her feel doubly secure. She felt, too, that it would not be fair to the children to deprive them of his occasional company. "They do so love you," she said, with one of the bursts of affection to which she had accustomed him. "Who would not love you? Everybody who has ever known you must be fond of you. You are so considerate, so kind," etc., etc.

Whatever happened, she assured him, she would re-

turn before the end of July, in good time for the holiday move. The furnished house at Westgate that they had taken for August and September would be ready for occupation by July 30th, and she intended to send on some of the servants to make everything comfortable. She hoped that he would be able to spare her a few days at Westgate before he started on his own holiday with Colonel Grey. After such a dreadful long separation it would be so lovely to be together once more.

Meanwhile, before receiving this answer to his impulsive proposal, he had seen Diana again two or three times. To wipe out the last haunting memory of the Kew Gardens fiasco, he had taken her, without his family, to see the herbaceous border at Hampton Court. They had met at a little dinner given by Lord Bekesbourne. And he had drunk tea with her one day in the work-room, and gone for a drive with her after tea.

He spoke to her more than once about his wife, describing Mabel's unselfishness and devotion with regard to her numerous family, and explaining how her mission of aid to relatives in distress had, as it were, temporarily broken up his home life, thrown him on his own resources, and given him this quite unusual task of filling in the time as best he could.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Vaile remains in Cornwall then?"

"Wales—a village not far from Llandrindod"; and he was going to tell her more about it, but something distracted Diana's attention.

She herself had spoken of Mabel the day before, asking one or two polite questions, but in the careless tone that, had he known her less well, might have offended him. If Mabel had been here, she would have been interested and anxious to pay attentions, but, as Mabel was away, there was nothing to be done. And of course, as

a general rule, one could not pretend that Diana took sustained interest in people's wives.

Or in people's husbands either—it amused him and for some unanalysed reason pleased him to hear her talk of her own husband. She spoke of him as if she liked him, but with a compassionate tolerance that seemed to show how greatly he had disappointed her at some time or other and how entirely she had got over her disappointment. She seemed also to convey the idea that, since she had ceased to apply any intensive culture to him and had recognised him as a large noble sort of tree that would never bear any fruit, he himself had been happier and more contented. She had wanted him to take the place that he ought to have filled in the political garden. She had tried to make him blossom as an authority on land and agriculture. She had tried hard, and failed.

Bryan gathered that he really was fonder of yachting than of anything else. He scarcely cared for hunting at all. But he had yachts of various sizes—one so small that it would only hold him and another man, and even then they had to get outside when she lay right over, and one so big that there was room on it for a large party all in separate bedrooms. That was *Amethyst*, and Diana was going to join her at the end of this month of July—but not for Cowes. Hugo shirked Cowes this year because of all the festivities in the North Sea—Fleet review, and the rest of it. They would cruise westwards.

If she grew tired of London before it was time to meet Hugo and *Amethyst*, she would go down to a little place of her own in Wiltshire to which she often withdrew when bored. It was just a garden and a farm, nothing more. "You must see it one day, Bryan."

After talking of her husband once, she reminded Bryan

that politics were to have come into his own career as a future Lord Chancellor.

"You have done better as it is, Bryan. But I think perhaps you ought to go into Parliament—now that you have made money."

Bryan said he would rather be dead, and that he would not waste twopence on the House of Commons or give twopence for it if it were for sale.

"Make it threepence, Bryan, and take the House of Lords as well."

And she spoke of money again. "You have all the money you want nowadays, haven't you, Bryan?"

"Oh, yes, more than I want."

"That's all right."

He admired her way of regarding money, and forgot altogether how he had once condemned her and what harsh thoughts he had entertained because of this very question. It seemed to him that she spoke in a grand way, and in the only right way, recognising money as something desirable for its use in supplying one's special requirements, whatever they may be, and not otherwise of the least value or consequence.

One morning, to his surprise, the post brought him two invitations from people that he did not know to attend evening-parties on that and the following evening. So sudden and yet tardy a desire for his company arising in the breasts of strangers must surely have been stimulated by external action, and he at once suspected whence the stimulation had come.

Diana confessed with the utmost frankness that she had asked her friends to ask him. "I thought it might amuse you," she said. They were talking on the telephone.

"You are very kind—but, amusing as I am sure it would be—"

"You prefer to stay at home by yourself. I quite understand. Bryan, I am not wounded about it."

"Diana, you know I think it's very kind of you to have thought of me."

"Not at all," and she laughed. "I shall think of you again this evening. What will you really be doing with yourself—I mean, after you have put the children to bed? Do you go into your garden and smoke a pipe? Do you wear carpet slippers when you are quite alone like that, just enjoying home?"

"Diana, I wish you wouldn't be so flippant. Tell me, are *you* going to Lady Merstham's?"

"I am not sure. It depends."

"What does it depend on?"

"On whether *you* are going, Bryan." Then she laughed again. "Consider that unsaid, please. Of course you are going—and, Bryan, I'll go if I possibly can. I'll be there at eleven o'clock—and I won't ask you to dance with me. But I'll try to let you take me down to supper—if you're just in the right place, just at the right moment. You used to be rather clever at that. Good-bye"; and she switched off.

He went out into his garden then and smoked several pipes. Diana's light chaff on the telephone seemed to have done him good and to have done him harm—good, because she had shown him that he was perhaps falling into the terrible habit of taking himself too seriously; harm, because she had engendered in him a feeling that his will-power was not as strong as he used to suppose, and that he was becoming a prey to vacillation and indecision even about trifles. He was enough of a psy-

chologist to know that the habit of making up one's own mind rapidly and finally about trifles tends to fortify the will, and thus aids one to make up one's mind about really important matters. And when one has registered a vow! As he smoked his pipe and meditated on those two invitation cards, it was as though trifles were leading up to an hour of crisis. Now perhaps he had arrived at a turning-point in his life, the parting of the ways; for he had sworn to himself that he would never be trotted out in fashionable society.

That night, at Lady Merstham's dance, Diana talked to him very seriously; telling him that he was wrong to hide himself and try to be the veiled prophet of Regent's Park. She said that, as a writer of plays, he ought to go about freely among all sorts of people; observing their different points of view, their conventional mannerisms, their way of thinking; contrasting different social worlds; and so gathering the wide-spread material from which to draw fresh inspiration.

She said that writers who always sit at home, no matter how brilliantly clever they may be, suffer from want of æration in their work; they are like painters who stop in their studios painting things out of their own heads, or with a few stale models who pose for them day after day and year after year, instead of going into the open air and looking at nature face to face. She said, moreover, that now they were friends again and liked meeting each other from time to time, it was very convenient that they should be able to meet in this manner when otherwise they might not be able to meet at all.

While she talked he listened submissively, and thought that perhaps there was something in what she said. A case in point seemed to offer itself, as he remembered old

Vince and McCallum behind their high studio windows painting Italian sunshine and Scotch snowstorms in all weathers.

For the last hour he had thought that she was not going to talk to him at all, and had felt rather crusty about it; but now he ceased to blame himself for his folly in coming here, and realised that he had quite enjoyed the evening.

It was a grand party, such a gathering as he had not seen since he and Diana separated; but the Rip van Winkle feelings that he experienced in contemplating the new generation which had arisen while he slept were not unpleasant. Everything interested him, and he was amused by observing how much had changed and yet how little. Only, as time passed, he was slightly nettled because, after having dragged him here against his inclination, Diana was neglecting him.

She at least had not changed. She looked just the same, only a more stately presence. As of old, people surrounded her and paid court to her. She was not dancing; but she had been led into the ballroom and ushered to seats that represented the estrade of honour of a more formal age, and there she sat enthroned among the high and mighty, and all seemed to go and bow down before her. Without thrusting oneself into this august group it would have been impossible to claim her attention. She had seen him, but she made no sign to him that he might approach; he pretended to have seen her once and not to be able now to see her at all; and when she moved, and some instinct told him that she was within reach, he assumed the aspect of a grave and dignified fish out of water that does not any longer desire to be put back in the swim. Then her voice sounded at his elbow; she was talking to people close by. He had to

turn round to get out of their way, and she said suddenly, "Oh, I'm so thirsty. . . . Bryan, take me downstairs and get me some soda-water."

They sat at a little table in the supper-room, and two courteous old gentlemen, who must have been the host and somebody closely connected with the host, asked him beamingly if he was taking care of the duchess, and he said he was trying to do so and she said he had done it. He watched her sip soda-water from a tall wineglass, nibble an ice biscuit, and eat some grapes. That was just the supper that he used to get for her years ago.

And it *was* years ago. For a few minutes he had gone back with her to the time that could not really come again. After talking so seriously, she talked lightly, looking at him, laughing at him, with her face lit up by the electric lamp on the table, and her diamonds and her eyes flashing and glowing at him. Then in five or six minutes, perhaps ten, supper was over, and she got up and said good-bye. She did not go upstairs again. When she appeared in the hall, cloaked, and waiting for her car, he stood with her till she went away.

A few minutes' talk—that was what he used to go out at night for eleven years ago in 1903, in just such a summer as this; dressing himself with inordinate care, considering which set of buttons to wear in his white waistcoat, being as difficult to satisfy with a white tie as Brummel himself; hanging about for an hour in a crowd till his minutes came; thinking they were worth all the effort and fuss and trouble; going home to dream about them when they had passed.

Although he had been so inconspicuous and aloof amidst Lady Merstham's festivities, it was as if he had without striving made a great social success, for more and more invitations came to him. One could be sure

that these great ladies were not imitating Lady Paramount and only asking him because he was a literary celebrity; since one of them wrote him down as Mr. Byron Veale and another as Mr. Boyce Valli. That invitation promised music; and Boyce Valli struck him as a nice musician-like name. In any such variants or misspellings he traced Diana's hasty scrawl when issuing her orders that he should be bidden to concert or hop, as the case might be; but the hospitality prompted by Diana somehow spread far beyond her own circle, and Bryan began to be asked to parties by people Diana had never heard of and never wanted to hear of. Cards tumbled upon him by every post. He was made free of the Ritz Hotel for three nights in succession. Mrs. Brompton-Rhodes asked him to her daughter's coming-out dance at Claridge's, and Mrs. Locke Teddington, asking him to her small and early at the Cecil, told him to respond if he pleased to "The Elms," No. 900, Putney Hill. He was ashamed of his success, knowing that it was not deserved, and he hid his cards in a drawer after sorting out what looked like the trumps and laying them on top of the pack. Really, it was as if he had just been gazetted to the Household Cavalry, or been put on good Mr. Goblet's list at the Spinsters' Club—or as if some mischievous society fairy godmother, taking the fun out of Diana's hands, had flown round, saying, "There is a poor boy called Veal or Valli, or some such name—if you are giving a dance, do out of charity ask him. The lad is alone in London, he knows nobody, and he is passionately fond of dancing."

He availed himself of all this indiscriminate kindness only to the extent of going to such houses as were frequented by Diana; and there he renewed acquaintance with some of the people he had known in the past, and

was introduced to the successors of others. They were all pleasant, charming of manner, and some of them were very amusing, and even clever; they never bored him by speaking of his plays, although a few let him understand that they knew he scribbled, and thought he did it quite well. Diana said it was good for him. At any rate, as a little change he liked it. In these weeks he got away from *shop*, and all talk of *shop*. He found that he enjoyed this as a welcome relief from what had always seemed inevitable; although he felt now and then that in so enjoying himself he was guilty of treachery towards the Kelly Giffords and Madame St. Clouds of his own proper world.

All these days and nights that he was giving to idleness and frivolity must be paid for by hard work later on. That was of course understood; and to prove to himself how thoroughly he understood it he wrote to Alton Grey, crying off the adventurous holiday that had been arranged between them. Next year, perhaps. But this year impossible, because he would have to work all through August and September.

The autumn drama. Yes, by Jove, July getting on now; well on; July beginning to run out fast.

Then he ceased to practise self-deception, about this matter at any rate. There would be no autumn drama. It was a painful interview at the Renaissance Theatre when he told poor little Mr. Cranbourne.

"This isn't like you, Vaile."

He was sorry for Mr. Cranbourne, and he apologised humbly for disappointing him.

"No, I wouldn't have believed it. It hasn't been your way, Vaile—to go and let one down like this."

Bryan said he would pay forfeits, do anything.

"I counted on the first rehearsal for August 3rd as

sure as I counted on the Bank holiday itself. Really, it's a bit thick, Vaile. When they phoned up from the box office that you had come wanting to see me, I felt as sure as eggs that you had brought me the book complete."

Bryan could only repeat that he was sorry.

"And what am I to do, I'd like to know? Shut my theatre? Let my theatre? Can't let a theatre all in a minute—even if I hadn't a company on my hands. Miss Porchester, too! Got her because you couldn't do without her for your thing. She'll be a hundred pounds a week walking about to please you."

"Surely you have something else you can put up?"

"Nothing—nothing what I trust a brass farthing in. Oh, Vaile, you must help me out of this hole *somehow*. What about a revival? Have you anything free?"

Then Bryan suggested that he might revive *Evelyn Lestrangle*; although feeling that "revive" was scarcely the word to use about something that had never been really alive.

But in his despair Mr. Cranbourne snatched at this idea. "Why not? Let's think. It's a *chance*, anyway. Why didn't they like it? Serious interest! But tastes change. You are on the crest of a wave. See if the success of *Penelope's Dilemma* will float it? And it could be brought up to date, perhaps. Look here, Vaile, will you re-write it for me?"

"I am afraid I can't promise to do that," said Vaile. "But you'll be able to knock it about—better than I could myself."

"That's very handsome of you. Vaile, upon my word, I'll risk it."

Poor *Evelyn Lestrangle*!

XIII

BRYAN'S next engagement was a concert at the Dover Street Gallery given by that much-wooed but still inveterate old bachelor, Mr. Francis Goldberg. There was no crowd and the music was tip-top, as was the company and the supper, for Mr. Francis was as popular as he was rich. Indeed, his one fault was that for twenty years and more he had refused to share his amiability and wealth with the nice suitable wives that his friends found for him. He never denied that they were nice or suitable; only with subtle tact and kindly oriental smiles he evaded being caught by any of them, and when they married other people in a huff he always gave them a nice suitable trinket out of the glass cabinet that he kept well stocked with wedding presents.

Diana sat in the front row with several ambassadors and one princess, and Bryan knew that he could not go and sit there too unless requested to do so by Mr. Francis; but when the time arrived for a little friendly talk with her, it didn't come off. It never came off. During an interval in the concert, when he stood expectant, she went round the gallery looking at the Cubist pictures with somebody else.

This other person had an historic name; he was head of a family famed for their good looks. He was one of those people known to Greater London, just as Diana was, only in a lesser degree. Schoolgirls bought his portrait and languished over it, thinking him like the nobleman in their favourite novel. His hair was grey now,

but his moustache was brushed and frizzed as well as ever; and he strutted along with Diana, looking like a great goggle-eyed dressed-up doll, smiling in a placid ecstasy of life-long self-conceit. At least, that is how he appeared to Bryan, who, watching him with dignified contempt for his real emptiness and futility, remembered things that he had formerly heard without paying any attention to them or taking the smallest interest in them. This great booby's historic name was one of the names that had been connected with Diana's name.

When the music began again he was still with her. They sat together in one of the back rows, where there was room for more if Diana had wanted anybody else near her.

Bryan left the concert and went to the Betterton Club and had supper with the old gang. He was angry with Diana, and more angry with himself for being angry with her. What did it matter to him?

Not a bit. Only it showed him that his attempted friendship would not do. Certainly he did not propose to waste his time in filling her odd moments with elevated conversation; to be the *pis-aller* when she wished to hold forth on art and the drama; to be the trustworthy old father-confessor who is there to listen to the spoilt child when she pours out her vague regrets, and who may be relied on to look the other way when she is naughty. He went to bed feeling sore and angry, but altogether determined to have no more of it.

Then she spoke to him in the morning.

"Bryan, is that you? Why did you disappear last night?"

"I was bored."

"So was I. But I waited, expecting you."

"Oh, I'm sorry you troubled."

"Bryan, what's the matter? Are you angry?"

"No, of course not. What about?"

"I don't know. Well, I want you to do something."

"What is it?"

"Let us go out of London somewhere this afternoon—to Windsor or Ascot. It may be my last chance."

He decided to go, in order to tell her plainly that it was the last time.

Her yellow car floated slowly out of London, as if merely being carried on the tide of traffic, till they had passed Hammersmith; and then it seemed to lift like a seaplane, to leave the dark shining surface of the Castelnau Road, and to fly. Even then there was no sense of fast motion, no dipping or rocking, and one only knew that the pace was good because of the distances that were silently, smoothly devoured. They glided through Windsor, and flew again in the park and round and round the forest.

They left the car in one of the forest roads and walked for a little time down rides that had been cut through the younger plantations; and after their walk they returned to the car, went on to Ascot, and had tea in the garden behind the hotel. Diana said that she was enjoying it; and it would have been jolly enough, only it was all spoilt for him by his resentful, troubled thoughts.

It was no good her smiling at him so frankly, talking to him so openly and freely, looking so wonderfully attractive that the few people they met turned and stared, forgetting their manners in their admiring surprise, and that two groups of tea-drinkers at the hotel could not get on with their tea because of her dazzling propinquity—she might have power over others to-day, but she had no power over him. She had lost it last night. The sharply-detailed mental picture of her seated beside that

moustachiod fop at the concert was so vivid that the live picture of herself could not obliterate it. Once, when she said it was good of him to give her this long restful afternoon, his secret indignation nearly made him explode into replying, "I suppose you asked your friend Lord Sedgemoor first, and as you couldn't get him you thought of me again." That would have been a lamentable thing to say; to blurt out that historic name, and thus betray the first trivial irritating cause of his reasoned decision. No; if he had said quietly and chaffingly, "You must not rely on me for the future; and if you really require a sort of tame-cat companion for your leisure hours, I would suggest your promoting Mr. Ambrose Lake to the vacant post," that might have been permissible, and it would have conveyed his intention while concealing his irritation. But no mention of the historic name in any circumstances.

He would say what he had to say on their journey back to London; but now, seated again in the car and looking from its depths at the glass panels between them and the chauffeur and footman, it occurred to him that his words might be overheard.

"Can they hear us?" he asked.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course. Oh, Bryan, what fun! Are you going to tell me secrets?"

He was silent, and they swung up the long hill through the woods.

Then she spoke of the invitation that he had received from Lord Bekesbourne for Saturday to Monday at his famous country house in Hampshire. After that, she said, it would be good-bye for some time, because she did not intend to return to London.

"I think we'd better say our good-byes beforehand, then. You won't see me at Test Court."

"Why not? You told him you would go."

"I know I did. But I have changed my mind. Bekesbourne will forgive me. He won't feel too much disappointed."

"Yes, but *I* shall. Bryan!" And in her voice there sounded one of those deep notes that used to thrill him. "You know *I* counted on your being there."

Then he spoke abruptly and irritably, almost violently.

"Diana, what are we playing at? What are *you* playing at?"

"How do you mean? Bryan, I don't understand."

"This ridiculous idea of friendship—impossible and out of the question—our meetings and arrangements—for me to dance attendance—" His irritation was exploding in spite of himself; and though he tried to talk reasonably, just explaining why it was inadvisable for them to take any further excursions together, he was merely jerky and incoherent. His failure made him angry; and, losing all control of the internal fireworks, he let go the historic name with a sudden bang. Next moment he found himself talking rather louder than he wished, but very fluently, as he asked her in effect what the deuce she meant by playing the fool with that ass Sedgemoor yesterday evening. And this was not the most regrettable thing that he said, while the fluency lasted, in regard to the injudiciousness of her conduct.

"Bryan!" Her face had brightened again; she seemed quite pleased. "Are you really paying me this wonderful compliment? Have I really awakened jealousy?"

"Jealousy! You flatter yourself."

"You big stupid Bryan! Of poor old Jack Sedgemoor, too"; and she laughed softly.

He said further disparaging things about this nobleman, and she told him to go on and say anything he liked if it did him good. It was not paining her in the least.

She persuaded him that he had been wrong in supposing that she felt tenderness now or had ever felt tenderness for the much-photographed Sedgemoor. And it was impossible to doubt that this was the truth. The gossip, the twittering of tom-tits, had been, in this case at least, absolutely without sense. It was a relief to him to know it, and yet for a little while he was still angry with her. Weariness and bitterness mingled with his dissatisfaction. He had spoken in an unworthy manner; he wished he had said nothing at all; but he felt he must go on and say more. It was as though, having started a quarrel without any cause, he must continue the quarrel until he could justify himself.

While they talked, he had instinctively drawn into the corner of the broad, deep seat, so as to look at her fairly and squarely and not have her close at his side; and she had drawn away to her corner, turning her face towards him, bringing them face to face.

Except that they were gliding down-hill now, through the long street of a town, he had no consciousness of anything except themselves.

She had said something about having always hoped that sooner or later he and she would be friends again, and he had said that he could not believe it.

"That's not very polite."

"I'm sorry."

"And it isn't very kind, either."

For a moment her face had flushed faintly; but now she was pale again, looking at him appealingly.

"I can't pretend about it, Diana; and I can't see what's to be gained by any pretence on your side."

"It's not pretence."

"You know that you never cared for me—really."

"That's not true. And *you* ought to know that it isn't. I did care for you—and I went on caring for you."

"How am I to believe that?"

"You don't want to believe it."

"Well, my dear girl, *think*. For all this time, till the other day, did it matter to you whether I was alive or dead?"

"Of course it did. All the time I was taking the greatest interest in you. Following your work with such pride and pleasure, delighting in your success."

"You didn't write to tell me so, did you?"

"Did you want me to write?"

"No. Only when you talk of being so interested in my wretched work—well, I suggested that you didn't show your interest."

He was quarrelling now for the sake of quarrelling, not choosing his words, saying anything foolish that offered itself; and something in Diana's changed manner, her indignant protestations, the reproachful tones of her voice, made him hate himself for his anger even while he stimulated it with memories of her numerous transgressions.

"I showed my interest in every possible way," she said. "I wanted you to get on. I longed for you to make a real hit. I was miserable about it when *Evelyn Lestrangle* failed, and they told me you couldn't find a manager to do anything else of yours. I knew what it would mean to you—that you'd lose confidence and be unhappy—and I did everything in my power—I never rested till—But what's the use of talking of it?" She had flushed again, and she turned from him and looked out of the window. "You did make another success. That was the great

thing. And I have loved all your plays, Bryan — and thought of you much more than you'd ever believe."

He sat silent, thinking. His unreasoning, self-induced anger had evaporated in a moment, and a coldly uncomfortable dread was taking possession of him. He spoke hesitatingly now, but very seriously.

"Diana, what was that you said about hearing that I couldn't find a manager? Who was it told you that?"

"I don't remember."

"Somebody must have told you."

"I dare say I read it in the newspapers. Everybody would know it, wouldn't they?"

"No, I don't think so. And it certainly wasn't said in the newspapers."

"Well, I tell you, I tried to find out all about you, and how you were getting on."

"I see. But you said just now that when you heard I wasn't getting on you did all in your power—to help me. What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing at all, really. I told people how clever you were—a writer that must make his way. I *advertised* you, Bryan"; and she turned and smiled at him.

"Didn't you do more than that?"

She shook her head, and he saw her lips trembling.

"Did you go to someone and say that money would be provided if a manager cared to try my plays?"

"No, of course not."

"That's not true."

She denied again, but he forced her to confess the truth; and when she put her hand upon his arm with a pretty, deprecating gesture, he moved his arm as if instinctively shrinking from the smallest contact with her.

His sense of humiliation was horrible. Diana had been the founder of his fortunes. It seemed to him as if the

discovery of this shameful secret robbed him of every title to respect. It was not only the destruction of that comforting and sustaining idea that he had so long nourished with regard to the capitalists who had been struck by his excellence as a writer and had backed their opinion in such a handsome way; it was the hateful thought of having been bolstered up with her money—with the money of that unknown man who liked yachting. For it was his money to begin with—all of it.

"You had no right," he said sternly, "to put me under an obligation to you without my knowing it."

"Bryan, you are speaking very unkindly."

She went on talking, but he did not listen. He thought of his elation in that distant time when Kelly Gifford came and told him of his wonderful backer, and how easily he had swallowed the tale given him by those solicitors. Did they know that it was Diana? Very likely—almost certainly. Those other solicitors, Diana's people, would have informed them "masonically," as something not to be mentioned. And Wilkinsons' perhaps thought that he knew himself, laughing at him for his affectation of reluctance, but pretending to believe that all his swagger was genuine. Did Gifford know? In his conceit, he had been so ready to believe that strangers would spring forward to support him and his brilliant efforts. And it was just Diana—the woman who had jilted him—coming to his rescue, taking compassion on him, seeing that, unaided, his feeble attempts were failing, and thinking they would always fail. The money was paid back promptly—thank heaven for that. But without the money, where would he have been? It had brought him success, it had opened his entire career. But for the help given at that crucial moment, he might never have won through to success at all. Everything would

have been difficult and different; he would have had no Gifford, no Miss Clarence, no Quadrant Theatre to make a regular going concern of him and his plays.

"You had no right to do it without letting me know," he repeated.

He remembered his passing doubt as to whether it was his wife who wished to risk her poor little inheritance in order to get him out of his troubles. He would not have accepted such assistance from his own wife. And it was Diana.

She was saying now that it had been no obligation, and again she reproached him for his unkindness.

"Besides, if, as you choose to call it, it was an obligation, what does it matter? When people are fond of each other, what do obligations count? Bryan, dear, don't be ridiculous about it. Look at it the other way round. Suppose you had thought that you could anyhow help me, wouldn't you have done it?"

"That's totally different. You don't seem to understand; a man *can't* take any help from a woman—at least, no help that's in the form of money."

"Is that worthy of you, Bryan? You don't think it really. It is too absurd—the fetish of money. You have said yourself, again and again, that it is only common-minded people who make a code of ethics in which money is treated as something sacred—not to be given or received, but only bartered for. You said it in *Evelyn Le-strange*. You have said it always."

And this was quite true. He had said something of the same sort even so lately as the other day, when admiring Diana's grand manner in speaking of money. Only as applied to this case, his own case, the theory wouldn't hold water.

"You don't understand," he repeated wearily.

They had reached the outskirts of London now, and in the traffic the car was gliding slowly homewards.

"I am sorry," she said presently, "that we have dragged out all this ancient history, and excited ourselves about it. Really, it wasn't worth while."

When they reached Hammersmith she asked if he would let the car go to the Regent's Park and drop him at his door. "I have plenty of time, Bryan."

"No, please—you are very kind. But I'll get out at Hyde Park Corner, if you don't mind dropping me there."

"And you'll forgive me?"

"Forgive you!" And he laughed bitterly. "Everyone would say that I ought to thank you and tell you how grateful I am—and I suppose it's brutal and boorish of me not to have done so. But you have made me feel such a fool, such an utter fool."

And neither of them spoke again till the car was passing the wall of Knightsbridge Barracks. Then once more she put her hand on his arm.

"Say you'll forget all about it, and that it makes no difference."

"I can't. It has made all the difference in the world to me. But, Diana, of course I do thank you. It was kind of you to bother about me."

"I bothered because I cared for you. Do you believe it?"

He looked at her, but did not answer.

"Bryan," and she looked him full in the face. "Believe it or not, you have always been more to me than any other person in the world."

He knew now clearly, even if he had felt any lingering doubt before, that he ought to have no more to do

with her. The episode must be closed at once and for ever.

He did not see her or communicate with her for three long empty days, and in this time he arrived at the conclusion that it had been really absurd to make such a fuss about her secret interference in his past affairs. He had certainly been brutal to her after making the discovery. Once more it had been the wound to his self-conceit that stung so cruelly. No; in reason and decency, whether he liked it or not, he should be grateful to her for what she had done. But that result of his reflections, far from altering his view as to how he must necessarily treat her in future, only confirmed it. It was what she had said to him at the end of their drive that necessarily made further relations impossible.

It was this—just the few words and the touch of her hand on his arm and the look in her eyes—that he thought of incessantly as the fact which separated them for ever.

He was thinking of it now, as he sat alone in his room at the end of the third dull day. It was late at night, after one o'clock; everyone slept except himself, and the whole house was dark and silent. He started and dropped his unread book when the telephone bell began to ring. In the silence its sudden clamour seemed to fill the house with sound.

He went out of his room, across the darkened hall, into the other room; without troubling to switch on the light, made his way to the telephone; and stood in the darkness, holding the receiver to his ear, and quivering with expectancy.

“Bryan, is it you?”

“Yes.”

"Bryan, I am so tired. And I am unhappy, because you are angry with me. Say good-night to me."

"Good-night."

"Good-night, Bryan. . . . You are coming to Test Court?"

"No."

"Have you told Lord Bekesbourne that you can't come?"

"No, not yet. I shall tell him to-morrow."

"I have counted on you."

He stood there spell-bound. The silence of the house, the darkness, isolated him, cut him off from the associations of ordinary ideas—all the familiar life that had surrounded him so long had gone, and for the moment was forgotten, as completely forgotten as if it had never been. This was years and years ago; when he was impelled by impossible hopes that would never be realised; when he was full of imaginations and fancies that had the quality of dreams, seeming so glorious till you wake and find they are nothing at all.

And her voice sounded again, low and sweet. She was standing in a moonlit glade, stretching her arms towards him, trying to draw him to her from the darkness beneath the trees, where he stood trembling, fighting the spell, struggling not to yield and go to her.

"Bryan, I want you there."

He did not answer.

"I want you very, very much. . . ."

"Bryan, I want you."

Then silence. She had dropped her arms; and she moved away through the moonlight, not looking back, because she knew that he was following her.

And he resisted no more. He did not think of right or wrong. He gave himself to the spell.

XIV

IT used to be observed with regard to visiting at English country houses before the war that there were two kinds of hostesses—the active hostess and the passive hostess.

When you arrived at the passive house nobody took any notice of you, and you felt as you had felt years ago when going to a new school; you were homesick, you moped a little; then you made the best of a bad job, tried to win a friend or two, and perhaps after all enjoyed yourself.

At the active house the hostess took charge of you, and you felt like a prisoner just alighted from the black maria. You were told the rules, the hours of meals, the system of recreation; your name or number was announced to all your fellow-prisoners; you were expected to look bright and cheerful each time you were inspected; you were made to give the keys of your private port-manteau to one of the warders—in a word, you knew that there could be no hope until you had served your week-end sentence and were set free on Monday morning.

And whereas a week-end house-party in a small country house used to be an overflowing superabundant affair, reminding one in its assembled and factitious gaiety of a bank-holiday fair on the village green, a party of equal numbers in one of the greater houses of England seemed nothing at all. The great house swallowed the party without gulping, and at once resumed its aspect

of calm composure. Even when you all gathered together before dinner in one of the many rooms, you felt that the larger portion of the house was still unaware of you; this room had seen so much in its time that you could not startle it; indeed, there was no mischief that you could get up to anywhere about the house that had not happened there before—and far worse, too.

Test Court was this sort of house, and Lord Bekesbourne and his elderly sister must be classed as hosts of the passive kind. The house itself, although built in the time of William and Mary, was more Italian in style than Dutch, and it seemed immense as you caught glimpses of it through the beech trees of the park. Then, after crossing a stone bridge and drawing near, you saw grandeurs of forecourt, semi-circular wings or dependencies, cloisters or colonnades, iron gates, an equestrian statue; and then, as you arrived, the height of the portico above your head and the number of the stone steps before your feet made you feel comparatively very small indeed. You entered a great square hall and had an impression of tall, narrow windows, tall, narrow pictures, rich oak carving, crimson brocade between panels; but no doors apparent, except the vast opening in the wall through which you had escaped from the portico. An invisible door relented and showed itself suddenly, and you passed into another hall of exactly the same size, but higher, lit from the roof, with a shallow staircase, a gigantic hanging lantern, and more pictures. This second hall was rich in doors; and you could go through any one of them with full confidence, if a stranger to the house, that you would promptly lose yourself.

Your only safe plan in that event was to struggle resolutely towards the other side of the house, the garden front. Here the long range of rooms led one into an-

other, the view of the terrace with orange trees just outside the windows served to guide you, an endless path of carpet running across the shining parquetry through all the doorways encouraged you to persevere, and sooner or later, if you were not led astray by the temptations offered by the Bekesbourne Vandykes, the Bekesbourne Lelys, the Bekesbourne china, you would come into a room containing human life in the shape of some of the other visitors.

Of course, as a new arrival, you had servants to aid in your first hunt for the house-party; and if Bekesbourne happened to be about, and not playing golf in the park or wandering round the garden with a lovely lady, and giving her paternal advice that both knew would not be acted on, he welcomed you in an entirely charming way. In his absence—and he generally was absent—Lady Eliza did her passive best. But in fact you could safely take it for granted that you were welcome, for some reason or other, or you certainly would not have been there at all. Just as Bekesbourne, always doing what he liked, bought the pictures he wanted, no matter what the cost, so he collected naturally the very choicest guests; but, since he only consulted his own taste, he never scrupled to include in his selection some small unsought-for piece if its manner pleased him, even though it had not a great name to support its merit.

These week-end parties of his were famous, although not known of to the suburbs, never written of in newspapers, merely talked about in the highest and most exclusive circles. Hitherto stern and forbidding matrons of exalted rank would perk up and begin to take notice of you if you could say, "I was at Test last Sunday." "Oh, really? Do tell me who was there." Then you recited the names—those heavy, knock-down names that

used to count with dames of high degree, with radical members of Parliament, with Mr. Ambrose Lake: owners of other show places as big as or bigger than Test; peers whose titles sounded old-fashioned when Shakespeare wrote *Henry the Fifth*; the majestic reigning beauties, who were beauties when they began to reign and still reigned by prescriptive right; the young new real beauties, who were more like revolutionary leaders than queens, considering the destruction and havoc that they caused; the excellent plenipotentiaries of kings of foreign countries; the absolute rulers of England and the British Empire, the men of destiny, like Mr. Brentwood, Mr. Calverley, and Mr. Jordan. Then perhaps, to play light after such terrific rights and lefts, you put in a few Lord Edwards and Lady Hyacinths, and even a Miss or two, who were only supremely fashionable, gallant, or gay.

And this party of July 25th, as well as being the last party of the year, was by no means the least grand party of the year, both in respect of the beauty of the ladies and the illustrious qualifications of the men.

It was about six o'clock when Bryan Vaile found a small contingent of it drinking tea in a room with doors open to the long stone terrace.

Lady Eliza, at the tea-table, welcomed him, knew his name directly the servant murmured it to her, and at once introduced him to the Duchess of Middlesborough and the great Mr. Brentwood, who were seated on the deep cushioned seat of one of the windows.

The duchess said she knew him already.

"Oh, yes," said Lady Eliza.

And Mr. Brentwood said that to a certain extent this was true in his case also, and he begged to express grateful thanks for some very pleasant evenings.

This troubled Lady Eliza, and made her think that she had been wrong in knowing Mr. Vaile's name so promptly, and that he was really Lord John. Must be—the only place in which Mr. Brentwood could be given a happy evening was the House of Commons, and he had meant to compliment Lord John on his oratory.

Bryan drank his tea absent-mindedly, but noticed that Lady Eliza poured it out absent-mindedly. She talked to two youngish women and a pallid young man, who sat at the table eating cake thoughtfully, but she attempted no further introductions. People passed the windows and their voices floated in—a tall man with glasses, who was certainly Mr. Calverley; Lady Merstham; and unknown figures. Diana, in a fawn-coloured dust-cloak and a hat with broad wings, was making Mr. Brentwood laugh. His strong, keen face softened and lit up, so that if you knew him only by photographs and caricatures you would not have recognised him; he beamed at Diana, and shook his grey head playfully; he liked her as much and was just as fond of sitting by her and frivolling in this manner as when, with her audacious disregard of people's weight and importance in the State, she used to make him come to those luncheon-parties in Bruton Street.

Bryan glanced at her from time to time, for an instant watching the movements of her white hands as they amused themselves with the loose gloves that she had just peeled off, the warm sunlight on one wing of her big hat, the shadowy and dusky tone of her face when she turned from the window towards the room. Except for her, there was a sense of unreality about everything. This solid room, the stone flags of the terrace, the orange trees, the extensive background of gardens, the faint perfume of roses, were only scenic—just the

setting to her. It was as if she had raised it all; all that one saw, including grey-haired rulers of England, and all that one didn't see—the great house with its halls and corridors and staircases, the river and the bridge, the park, the woods, the steps and balustrades, the groups of strolling men and women;—as if by her magic she had made it all spring into existence to furnish her little realm of glamour. The fancy came to him that if he returned here, say, on Tuesday, he would find only wild thicket and brake; perhaps here and there a stone slab showing beneath the tangle of briars, a broken balustrade, the bust of a faun tumbled from its weed-covered pedestal, to perplex and puzzle one as does the faded memory of a dream; but no vestige of the fine house and the fine company. Having served its brief purpose, all would have vanished again.

Then, in spite of his wandering thoughts, Bryan became fascinated by what Lady Eliza was doing. Although she had given people their tea in such a dreamy, careless manner, she now seemed to be making tea with wrapt attention. She poured it into the slop basin! She put milk in, a little more—lump after lump of sugar. Who was it for? He started. She was offering him the jorum.

"Have you a steady hand—Lord John? Please carry this to the fireplace and put it down by the corner"; and she pointed. "Bingo! Bingo! Bingo! Tea!"

A plethoric King Charles spaniel waddled out from her skirts and went to meet Bryan at the fireplace.

As he moved back towards the table Diana stopped him and made him go to her in the window. Mr. Brentwood was laughing again, and he informed Bryan that she had said something very good, but very cynical. "She said—What did you say, Diana? Repeat it."

"I only told him that there is no such bore as a really intelligent person being intelligent at the wrong time and in the wrong place"; and she, too, laughed. "That's nothing to what I say sometimes, is it, Bryan?"

"It's very good," said Mr. Brentwood. "Almost good enough to put into one of your delightful comedies, eh, Vaile?"

Bryan said it was too good for that; it would make all the rest of his delightful comedy seem so dreadfully flat.

Then Bekesbourne came in from the terrace, cheery and genial, with fatherly smiles for everybody, clapping Bryan on the back and giving the great Mr. Brentwood a slap on the shoulder. He said that Diana must come into the garden; he told Mr. Brentwood that he had arranged a match at golf for him on Sunday morning; and he gave his sister an important piece of domestic information—about somebody who had a headache and wouldn't appear at dinner.

Lady Eliza seemed oppressed by a vague notion that she would have to do something for the invalid, but at present could not guess what. She rose from her chair and looked about her. One felt dimly that, although her attitude towards them was passive, these parties were too much for her. But she loved and feared her brother; she would die at her post rather than desert him.

Everybody was going out to the terrace, and she followed Bryan to the open doorway and spoke to him as if answering a question.

"Bingo is ten years old." Then she looked hard at him, and said firmly and confidently, "You are fond of dogs—Mr. Vaile?" as if to prove to herself that she had been right from the very beginning, and had never wavered for a moment about his name.

The gardens were splendid in the lovely evening light. It was still very warm, and everywhere the air was scented with flowers. As one looked back along the upper terrace the stonework seemed golden, and far away across the park the river was flashing like yellow flame as it crept behind the darkened beech trees.

Beyond the terraces and the sunken rose-garden, smooth broad lawns merged into ornamental woods, with round points, statues, and stone seats. Bryan thought how beautiful it must be at night. He had been strolling with other people, each couple or group aimlessly following the people a little way ahead of them; and when they came to the first of the circular spaces among the trees the leaders turned, and, all beginning to drift back again, he found himself with Diana by his side.

"I chose all this for mine," she said, stopping him, with her hand for a moment on his arm. "This is the part I like—not the trim lawns and beds and borders; but these trees, and the soft turf, and those benches—and the statue. This is for my own." And as they strolled back towards the house she went on talking the silly nonsense talk that they used once to indulge in. "You understand? You know everything I mean but can't say. One little small glance between us two saves all those words and words that ordinary people struggle with because they can't understand." And on the terrace she paused, so as not at once to join the group ahead. "Bryan, what would you like me to wear to-night? I can dress for you in very pale blue. Or would you like me better in silver and grey? What goes best with fir trees and shadows and carved stone?"

She smiled at him, and he stood tongue-tied looking at her. Next moment she was with the others, going into the house.

Then he went for a comparatively brisk walk with an amiable, shambling man who knew Test intimately because he had been here again and again. This stranger took him through the park, skirting the pretty woods, and showed him the eighth green and ninth tee of the golf-course; and they talked learnedly of the agonising game, but with strangely little real interest on Bryan's part.

All the colour had faded when they got back to the gardens; a soft greyness filled the whole world. It was as dark now probably as it would be at any time of the lovely summer night.

"Everyone gone to titivate, I suppose," said the amiable stranger, yawning, as they came into the lamp-glow of the empty rooms.

The whole house was lit up now. The wood-carving had amber tones, the parquetry reflected the lamplight, the hangings and brocaded panels seemed to take richer tints, Lely's pouting-lipped ladies stared from their frames like masqueraders looking at sunshine out of dark casements with unblinking eyes; and as Bryan passed from room to room, through the hall with the staircase and the lantern, all so empty, silent, splendid, he had again that impression of unreality, and the fancy of the enchanted palace, the fabric of glamour, created by Diana to confuse and delight.

He had the same feeling at dinner—unreality, something fantastic about this sumptuous and lengthy meal, with its long perspective of candelabra and gold baskets of fruit that repeated itself in mirrors even when the immense table ended, the painted ceiling of fore-shortened naked-shouldered nymphs looking down at the naked shoulders below them, the noise of mingled voices,

and the wonderful dream-like silence outside the open windows.

He was somewhere near the middle of the table, and the candelabra prevented him from seeing Diana at the far end, where she sat at his host's right hand. He had seen her before dinner. She had been standing with other women round her, and she seemed to be dressed in silver and grey—in moonbeams and shadows—in anything soft as light and graceful as a cloud; she had pearls no whiter than her neck; and her eyes were lustrous, large, unfathomable. He had drawn near enough to see all this, and also that the other women were stately of mien, grand and statuesque, full of life and colour, with opulent ripe beauty or budding prettiness, gorgeously clothed, heavily jewelled, and that compared with her they looked like butchers stripped for fight, housemaids dressed for a ball, mountebanks disguised for a street carnival. Then, when Bekesbourne spoke to him, the wild idea had come that, in defiance of laws and rules and mathematical probabilities, he was going to be sent in to dinner with her. That was too wild, too fantastic. Bekesbourne gave him all that he was entitled to in the form of a Miss Hurstley, who started the conversation by saying, "Do you admire the duchess? I think she is looking so well to-night. Not nearly so tired and pinched as she was last year."

Bryan, always deficient of small talk, seeking for it now was like a man drawing water from a deep well; and every time the bucket came up there was less in it, and more and more obvious became the sound of the windlass as he toiled at it. But Bryan did not mind, and Miss Hurstley did not listen. Nothing mattered; the whole feast was unreal.

The lady on the other side took abrupt compassion on

him at a certain point, and talked to him with decision. She told him that the best sort of women did not desire votes and the wrong sort did not deserve them. As things were, women exerted *influence*, and, she did not know what Mr. Vaile thought, but she herself was sorry for any woman who could not make at least *one* man vote the way she wanted. And Mr. Vaile said he was sure she could—quite sure—exactly—he quite agreed. “Women rule in a variety of ways, Mr. Vaile. I don’t believe that at any time the sway that is quietly exercised by women over men was greater. Look at Mr. —; but I won’t be imprudent.”

They had sat down very late, the meal had lasted for ever, and when the ladies had gone they again seemed to sit at the table for ever. Bryan glanced at the windows, almost expecting to see daylight. But the grey mystery outside was still untroubled and unchanging.

Lord Bekesbourne was old-fashioned in this respect; he liked a good long dinner and a good yarn after it. The two elders that sat at Lady Eliza’s end had now gone to join their host at his end, and in the reshuffling of places Bryan had moved up a little way. He listened to the talk without taking part or interest in it.

For a few minutes they talked of European politics. Things were very serious, as they always are when statesmen speak of them. If things were ever less than serious, their place and functions might seem to diminish in essential importance. Mr. Brentwood said he would not be surprised if he missed his game of golf by being called back to London to-morrow morning. Mr. Calverley said he would be surprised, because nothing could happen now till Monday. Somebody spoke of Austria and Serbia, of the need for a little quiet common sense, and of the

mistake of attempting to fan the fire in any way. Somebody else spoke of the assassinated Archduke—of having met him at Cannes and taken walks with him along the Croisette and up to the Observatory. And after that they talked no more politics.

Bryan heard his host say something about Diana. "Isn't she magnificent?" or words to that effect; and Mr. Brentwood nodded and laughed, and said, "But she takes my breath away." And Bekesbourne, dropping his voice, and looking a kind and perhaps over-indulgent father, said things to Mr. Brentwood of which Bryan caught scraps, though he tried not to listen. "Impossible to chain—and to that dull clayey fellow . . . way she was brought up . . . No, Diana . . . made a very good fist of it, all things considered."

At last Lord Bekesbourne got upon his long legs. The interminable sitting was over. All of them slowly drifted through the opened doors to join the ladies; and slowly groups formed themselves or couples sat apart in room after room, everybody now seeming to know exactly where he wanted to go and by whom he was expected to sit. Mr. Brentwood's bridge-table was waiting for him, and he went to it quietly and soberly, like an honest citizen going to the office to do business. Lady Pevensea and a sofa only big enough for two awaited Mr. Calverley, and he sat down solemnly and devoutly, as one performing a religious rite. Nobody but Mr. Brentwood and his three companions played cards, but people stood round the table at first watching the game. Diana was the centre of a small seated group by an empty hearth, in front of which Lord Bekesbourne stood with his long legs apart, as if warming himself with the memory of winter fires. And Bryan hung about expectant, as in

the old time, humbly waiting for his turn to come. All the windows were open, and the silence outside seemed to grow deeper every minute.

After a long while Diana left her chair by the hearth. She and Bekesbourne were watching the card-players. Bryan drew near to watch too, and Bekesbourne strolled back to the hearth.

"He oughtn't to have doubled," said Diana severely, addressing Mr. Brentwood's partner.

"I know, I know," said Brentwood genially. "But I do so many things I oughtn't to do. I mean well. I act for the best—"

Diana turned and looked at the windows.

"It is fearfully hot in here. Bryan, take me out on the terrace."

Bekesbourne looked at them with kindly, fatherly eyes as they passed by, and spoke to Bryan.

"Vaile. Make her put on a wrap."

"No, this will do," said Diana, as they reached the open doors in the next room, and she held up her gauze scarf. Indeed the night seemed as warm almost as the day had been; not a leaf of the oranges was stirring. Bryan arranged the scarf for her, and his fingers trembled as they touched her smooth shoulders. Then they stepped out of the lamplight into the soft greyness, their eyes confused for a moment, and then seeing that it was really not darker than it had been at dusk.

She took him through the garden to the wood; with linked fingers led him through the scent of the roses, past the lights of the windows, away from the sound of voices; led him into the wood—into her wood, into the heart of the dream, into a place of sacred elysian mysteries where nothing of the earth has value or weight, where no

mortal bond can count for the millionth part of a second against the caprice of a goddess. In the wood, by the statue and the stone benches, she stood in front of him, and whispered.

"Well, Bryan dear?"

He took her in his arms and kissed her, put his hand to her cool neck to hold lips to lips, and melted, almost fainted in delight.

Then she made him sit, and she settled down at his side with her bare arms round his neck.

"So you don't hate me any more?"

"I hate you more than ever."

"Why?"

"For making me do this."

"Hush—don't be silly"; and her sweet soft laugh was like a ripple of water on his face. "This isn't Venus and Adonis. I am Diana. Don't you remember me in your dreams—always—before you were born even—when you dreamed thousands of years ago? You are my Endymion."

"Endymion wasn't forty-five."

"He had no age. Diana made him immortal."

"Endymion wasn't married. He hadn't a family."

"Hush. Forget. For a little while—for two days—we belong to each other, and to nobody else." And she nestled closer to him, wrapping him round with the living charm; giving him little kisses—the flutter of rose-leaves; touching his face with her fingers, and talking rapidly, as of old. "I love you, I love you, I love you very much indeed. No man could ever be to me what you are. You need never have let me go—you might have had me always. Then I would have been good and faithful—instead of what I am."

He gave a sigh like a groan.

"Diana! You know it's not true."

"It is very, very true indeed."

"You were stone in your decision. Nothing could soften you."

"Yes, you could—but you are always the same. You don't believe in yourself. Stop sighing. How rude! Hold me fast now. You have got me at last. Kiss me and kiss me and show that you love me."

Ecstasy; but in the midst of it sadness—the pain that lies deep in such ineffable pleasure. Then swiftly all thought was obliterated, and only joy remained.

Returning to the house, they paused by one of the orange trees and peeped into a lighted room and listened to the voices. As they stood there two people spoke of them.

"Have Diana and the literary gent come back from their walk?"

"No, not yet. Did you expect them? I hope we have not got to sit up till they reappear"; and there was laughter.

Diana, pressing his arm, whispered:

"You see, you are compromised already. Your reputation is gone."

Mr. Brentwood's game of bridge was not finished, and Lord Bekesbourne had brought a chair to the table and sat watching it. He looked round and smiled at Diana.

"Eliza has gone to bed. She told me to say there are three brands of barley-water in the library, and the lemon variety is the one she recommends. It's the one she gives to Bingo."

Two days and nights of rapture;—and on Monday

she could not let him go; she took him with her to her retreat in Wiltshire for three more days. After that she was to join the yacht at Dartmouth.

He was no longer Bryan Vaile, or Mabel's husband, or anybody in particular; he was a poor mortal who had impiously broken through the barriers and had reached the unattainable delight that all other men have missed. He was eating forbidden magic fruit in the high gods' garden, drinking at their enchanted fountain, holding one of their immortal sisters against his throbbing heart.

On the fourth day they parted at a railway-station on the Great Western main line. She would not let him go with her as far as Dartmouth.

Their real parting had been at dawn in a room at the farm. It had been anguish, the tearing asunder of their loves. She clung to him, cold and shivering and tragic then, as they sat at a window and looked out at the still sleeping world. Beneath them was the homely English garden, and beyond that orchards and farm buildings, over the roofs of which one had a wide view. Dew sparkled on the grass, the distant woods were rainbow-tinted in the morning light; and one saw a hillside, a river, a church tower, and fields and fields and fields. It was just the common landscape of England: what one belittled so often, comparing it unfavourably with other lands, denying its tame beauty; until fate grew tired and woke one; and one began to know it better, began to bleed for it, to sigh for it, to die for it—just for England.

"Bryan, I know things are going to happen—big things, terrible things." And Diana was like a prophetess, with her white cold face, her dark hair all loose; lifting her bare arms, and whispering tragically. "I feel there is no time—no time left for anything. That's why I wanted you so dreadfully. Perhaps I am going to die.

No, it's more than that. I feel what perhaps people felt before the French Revolution—great forces at work, unseen, unsuspected." And she spoke of the murder of the Archduke. "Do you think that is only a beginning? Are kings and princes to be attacked everywhere? Do you think there is going to be a revolution in England? Do you think if they fight in Ireland the people will rise here too?"

The westward train had gone, and he was in the train that would carry him back to London. He sat inert. He was saturated with Diana, still breathing her atmosphere; but all of life that remained inside him was just a flame fed by memories of delight. There was no fuel there that sustains thought and logic and reason.

This outward shape of Bryan Vaile had been emptied, cast away, tossed towards London because she had no further use for it; but the soul of him was hers, was with her now—if she hadn't thrown that away as useless too.

XV

SLOWLY remorse, shame, and horror came to him. Could it be possible? He reached home early in the afternoon, feeling cold and miserable, although the sun was shining—as much as it ever shines through the heavy, smoke-laden air of London. The sight of the house touched him with new sadness; it looked forlorn and strange; so dull; and so small, with its queer little portico, green shutters, and the broad eaves that seemed to jut out just above one's head. It had suffered the contraction that surprises one when returning in middle-age to the house one has known in childhood and always remembered as vast and grand. Could this dingy little toy mansion really be the spacious, comfortable, happy home of which he had been so proud?

He carried unread letters from Mabel in his pocket, and there were unopened letters from her on the hall table. Of course, she was due home. Had she come? No, but Miss Hignet was expecting her to-day. As arranged, servants had gone forward this morning to Westgate to take possession of the furnished house; everybody was packing up; the whole family would move to-morrow or Saturday. Mrs. Vaile would certainly be here before dinner, but she had not been able to say what train she would travel by, and so Miss Hignet had done nothing about sending the car to meet her. The children were excitedly looking out for her.

Soon after tea-time she arrived, hot and tired, but beaming with love. She threw her arms round Bryan, and he felt that she would push him right over if he

wasn't careful, so solid was her embrace; she kissed him, and nearly knocked him down again. Then the children clambered about her; and she distributed hugs and kisses to them, radiantly happy at being back with them at last. "Say you have all missed me. Say you're glad to see me. . . . Oh, my dear," and she turned to Bryan, "how I have longed for you! Oh, how I have longed for you!"

He smiled, but was in dread that she would begin kissing him again.

He slunk away. The thing was too monstrous. His heart ached for her, bled for her; but this abominable catastrophe had occurred. The old love was dead. Fire had burnt it out of him. It seemed as if a large, warm, matronly stranger was sitting upon the sofa, where he used to sit with his arm round his wife's waist.

He went to the bottom of the garden and stood staring at the blank wall above the tennis-courts. His distress of mind was terrible. He was like a dreamer rudely awakened to reality; like a man who, after being a little uneasy about his bodily health, learns of a sudden that he has contracted an incurable disease; like one who, in shaking off the effects of drunkenness, begins to remember that while drunk he has committed a murder, that the crime will certainly be discovered, and that perhaps already the police are on his track.

Presently he began to walk slowly to and fro, with his hands clasped behind his back, thinking; just as he used to walk and meditate here when working out some tangle in the world of his invention, when a fictitious personage would not follow the plan laid down for him, when the claims of plot-interest threatened the higher interest of sound characterisation. He was able to think now, unable to prevent himself from thinking, with clearness and

rapidity. His situation presented itself in its most simple and essential form, and every difficulty or danger that arose from it could be logically followed, no matter how widely complicated each of them became. He dealt with himself as he would have dealt when play-making with a character hemmed round by adverse combinations of circumstance, exhausting the possibilities, seeking the solution that will satisfy ethics but not offend common sense; and it seemed to him that there was no way out. It seemed to him that the situation was like one of those tremendous no-thoroughfares of the Greek tragedies; it was contained in unyielding elements; fate itself had helped to construct its impassable barriers.

It seemed to him that his whole life was destroyed, that the past had tumbled into dust, that the future could bring nothing but dread and horror. While Diana lived he would be her slave—that is, she could call him whenever she wanted him and he would go to her. If she did not immediately tire of him, if she went on caring for him, their intercourse would infallibly lead to disaster. For him it was an impossible liaison—because she was too well known, someone you cannot hide, a duchess. And her rank seemed to make his part so odious and vulgar. The artist and the lady of quality—it is the most vulgar of all intrigues, most hateful to him by reason of its ancient traditions and every modern instance that he had seen or heard of. The author and the actress for whom he writes, the painter and the beautiful model who has inspired his pencil, the maker of music and the divine singer who sings his songs—one may plead excuses for such bonds as these, born, as it were, from the love of art itself, temperamental affinities, two kindred flames that meet and mingle; but what can be said in extenuation of the artist who leaves his art behind him, turns

his back on friends and comrades, and waits on stair-cases till someone drops her handkerchief for him to pick up and be dazzled by the coronet in its corner? That is how his friendship with the Duchess of Middlesborough would appear to those whose good opinion he used to value. He knew what his own world would say and think of him. He could guess what other worlds would say. He could readily conceive of the questions to be asked about him by *Tom-tits*.

If it continued there would be a scandal. No divorce, of course. But soon everyone would know. They would know at the club, at the theatre—everybody who came on Sundays would know. And last of all his wife would know. No, first of all his wife would know. She would read the secret in his eyes, his voice, his manner. Their life had been so close, so perfect in its communion, that any foreign influence between them must be at once detected. And he himself could not act the part that for so many years had been reality. He could not give her the outward semblance of a loving husband while the inner man was a traitor.

The more he thought of it the deeper grew his distress. There was no possible excuse for him. Remorse in regard to his wife was overwhelming. His gratitude—he thought of the million things he owed to her; of their children, of the nights they had watched together when the little girl was ill. He thought of her weeping, of her bowed head and quivering shoulders, when he had been cruel to her in the garden at Bournemouth years ago. He thought of her faith in him, when at last he had restored it—never to be shaken again. He thought of her kindness, her courage, her unselfishness. He remembered his vows in the church. He remembered what she had said to him, the words that had stimulated him to

vow fidelity beyond all the promises of the marriage service. She had said, "If you failed me ever, I should kill myself."

What would she do? Commit suicide? No, she would not do it now—because of the children. But her brave strong heart would be broken; every spring of life would be snapped; it would be worse than death for her.

No, it was he who ought to be done with it for ever. It was he who should commit suicide. Forsake the children? What good could such a father be to them? Better for them—a thousand times better that he were dead.

Suppose that this catastrophe were hidden. Suppose the intrigue with Diana dragging on a little, then finished. He could no longer trust himself. As he grew older he would grow worse. The poison put into his blood now would never fade—it would sting him to further infamies. He would sink to intrigues with girls at the theatre; abusing his position, making base bargains; running down the scale from the goddess to any nameless nymph.

Disgust of himself flooded all his thought. Weariness and disgust. The sense of finality, of irreparable, irredeemable trouble struck colder and heavier upon him. No way out of it—no means of escape from his home; no cloister that he could retire into; no prison for expiation; no hospital where he could go to be cured.

While he was dressing for dinner she came to his room.

"May I come in, dear? I have been with the children—but I grudge every minute that I am away from you now."

She was still in her travelling dress, and she said, apologetically, "Will you think me very piggy if I don't change to-night? I *am* so tired."

"Of course, don't trouble."

"I have washed facey and handeys, as Nancy used to say. Mabel quite clean little girl."

She sat on a chair at the corner of the toilet-table, watching him with her kind brown eyes as he tied his tie; and he felt towards her as one feels towards the honest, faithful dog that has always loved one, when one is secretly planning against it a consummation of treachery—to sell it, to abandon it, never to see it again.

"I know the servants tried, but did they make you comfortable all the time I wasn't here to take care of you?"

"Oh, yes, quite."

And she glanced round the room, at the bed, his dressing-gown, his slippers; at all his belongings.

"They ought to have given you another quilt."

"My dear, it has been stiflingly hot."

"Yet, but I mean for prettiness. I put out a lovely new bedspread—amber and gold—lovely." Then, still thinking of his comfort, she said, "Bryan, if you aren't coming with us to Westgate to-morrow, I think I had better leave Saunders behind to look after you."

"Are you all off to-morrow?"

"Yes, Miss Hignet has got on with everything so splendidly that I think we ought to go to-morrow afternoon. You see, next day, Saturday, there is sure to be such a crowd. Really the bank-holiday traffic will have begun to-morrow." And she asked again if he would accompany them.

He said no, it was not possible.

"When do you start with Colonel Grey?"

"I am not going. It's put off—for another year."

She was unselfishly sorry. It would have done him good. Colonel Grey was such a splendid man that a holiday anywhere with him must do one good. Also the

complete change of scene would have been refreshing and invigorating.

"But, oh, Bryan, will this mean that I shall have you down at Westgate?"

And he allowed her to understand that he would follow them to Westgate as soon as possible.

"Oh, how too lovely!"

Then she said more about domestic arrangements, always thinking of what would be best for him. She would leave Saunders, and the wife of one of the gardeners would do any cooking for him. The gardener's wife was a good cook; in some respects an even better cook than Mrs. Finney—or than Mary the kitchenmaid, who, as she often suspected, did nearly all the cooking that was supposed to be done by Finney. She wanted to leave the car—which Miss Hignet said was looking grand after its repairs—so that he might be able to run down to Westgate by road. But he would not agree to this arrangement.

She linked her arm in his as they went downstairs, and pressed against him affectionately. At dinner she told him all about her aunt. The poor old lady had taken a turn for the better.

"Thanks to your good nursing, Mabel."

"No, I don't think that—though of course I was useful. I felt I was of real use all the time. She'll never recover; but the doctor said it was a distinct rally. So I left them with an easy conscience.—I would have come anyhow. I said I would, didn't I? Nothing would have made me break faith with you. And now I am to have this heavenly reward—your company at Westgate. Oh, Bryan, I think I am the happiest woman in England to-night!"

Indeed, she was so happy, and prattled so gaily, that,

in one way, all was easy for him. When she said it had surprised her to hear that he had been away, and asked where he had been, he merely said that he had been staying for a few days with Lord Bekesbourne; and she expressed her hope that he had enjoyed himself, but asked no further questions.

The servants were delighted to see her back again, and she spoke to them cheerily while they waited at table. All their holidays had been arranged by her. They would all go away in turn as usual.

"Thank you, ma'am. We knew you wouldn't forget anything, ma'am, however anxious and worried you were."

She had brought with her a large basket of fruit, and she was disappointed that he would not eat any of it. Perhaps he would have some at breakfast. The children had already paid attention to it.

"They have told me about the treat you gave them, Bryan. They did so love it."

"Yes, I am sorry I could only give them one."

"They understood. Oh, do tell me. Is it done?"

"Is what done?"

"The play, of course."

"No, I haven't by any means done it. I had to lay it aside. I couldn't get on with it at all."

"That's because you hadn't me to help you." She looked round to see if the servants were still there, waited till the door closed, and then put her hand across the table for him to squeeze.

"Say it once more, Bryan—that you are glad to have me back."

And he had to say it.

"You are really and truly as glad to see me as I am to see you?"

His sense of guilt made him stammer. For a moment her words filled him with fear; they sounded to him ominously, as if some instinct of her own or some failure on his part had already aroused vague suspicions in her mind. In another moment he knew that it was a baseless fancy. She was looking at him with frank and steady eyes, her friendly, homely face full of confident affection. She would say this sort of thing again and again, just for the pleasure of listening to his assurances in reply.

After she had gone to bed he sat for hours alone downstairs in his work-room; and for most of the time he was thinking about her and how he might best spare her pain.

He could not go on with it—there was no other way out for him. He could not deceive her—anything was better than that. He could never confess to her, with the slightest hope that she would either forgive or forget. Knowledge of the truth would break her heart. How could there be any condonation for making light of what had smashed the whole fabric of their married life? There would be nothing left worth patching up, not even a foundation on which to build again. They were the Vailes, who loved and believed in each other; they were not Mr. and Mrs. Claude Rivett.

His love for her was not dead; perhaps it was stronger than it had ever been; but it had irrevocably altered in character. All the desire for her companionship, the joy of being by her side, the pleasure in the mere sight of her had been totally obliterated; but he felt a yearning desire for her welfare and an immense pity for her. His gratitude was boundless. The memory of every item of his debt to her was unblurred. All the evening he had been torn to pieces by things she had said to him; and even when, in spite of himself, noticing her matronly

aspect, the unbecoming fashion in which she had done her hair, the dreadful commonplace appearance of an evening costume that consists only of a white puffy blouse and a tailor-made skirt, he had wondered how till now he believed her to be an outwardly attractive woman, he still could see shining forth upon him the sweet, good soul that had lighted his heaven and been his guiding star;—through all, and in spite of all, he could see the real Mabel; the Mabel that time could not touch, that grey hairs, or wrinkles, or increasing size round the waist would never really alter or disfigure.

He sat with his hands clasped between his knees, staring at the carpet; and after a long time there came to him one of those revulsions of feeling that arise from the instinctive desire to escape a stress of thought that is unbearable. After all, was it really such a tragic *impasse*? He got up and walked about the room. And for a few moments, in the supreme relief of turning from the darker aspect of his situation, he began to believe that he had been torturing himself unreasonably.

Many sensible, matter-of-fact people would say that he was making a fuss about nothing. Why should he take so gloomy a view of the future? Why should he give up hope? The solution of all his trouble was still possible. Really, the way out lay open before him. His wife need never know, would never know; in a little while, say a year or two, all would be going on in the comfortable old way with them, just as if nothing had ever occurred to disturb or even to threaten their peace and happiness. All that he had to do was to forget Diana and henceforth behave himself properly.

Only he could not forget Diana.

He thought of her now, and instantly every cell and fibre of his brain and body throbbed, ached, and burned

with remembrance of her. He sat down again, his hands limp, his shoulders drooping; in exactly the conventional attitude that he might have given as a stage direction. Bryan Vaile sits huddled, looking straight before him, as though confronted with despair.

Incredible as it seemed, it was really no longer ago than this morning that he had said good-bye to her; and already, feeling that he had been separated from her for years, he was passionately longing to be with her. Suppose now the silence of the house were broken by the telephone bell, as had happened once before, and he heard her voice telling him that he might go to her. The mere thought of it made his heart stop beating and then begin to race; just the memory of her voice set him on fire. In imagination he could hear the message that would be rapture to obey. She was telling him that the yacht had not arrived; that for some reason the plan of the cruise had been abandoned; that she intended to return at once to her farm; that he was to meet her there without an hour's avoidable delay.

But that was a delirious imagination. No, she was lost to him; the yacht was steaming westward through the night; by dawn she would be another eighty miles farther away. She would not call him to her side for two long months. For two unending months she would leave him miserable and alone; and it seemed to him that he would not have strength to live through these two months, even if afterwards there were nothing to prevent the renewal of their love.

When at last he went upstairs to bed, he stood for a little while in the darkness after he had turned off the light on the landing outside his bedroom. All round him his little innocent world was sleeping soundly and peacefully; he was their chieftain, their leader, and he had

betrayed them. In greater or lesser degrees they all depended on him, looked up to him, respected him — his wife adored him; his children loved him; Miss Hignet venerated him and yet was fond of him; the servants liked him as much as servants ever like a male employer, they tolerated him as well-meaning, inoffensive, at least were satisfied that he could be relied on to act the gentleman; and he felt that he was a traitor to every one of them. He thought of what the house would be in a year or so, if he were dead. It would be all just the same; but it would be safe, the danger gone from it for ever. The legend of his honesty and kindness would live in it, kept alive by Mabel. All her sorrow would be softened then; she would be quite happy, regretting him but no longer mourning for him; the children growing up strong and well would fill her life; there would be plenty of money; she and they would be comfortable, free from care, contented.

Yes, that was the only way out.

Next day all was bustle and gay confusion. The children, wildly excited, careered about the house and garden; there were no lessons to occupy them, toys could not amuse them, their eager thoughts outstripping the slow hours had already flown to Westgate-on-Sea. Miss Hignet and the servants were still performing prodigies of packing, although "practically everything" had been packed over-night. Mabel, rather hot, very business-like, and overflowing with affection every time she ran up against Bryan, was here, there, and everywhere, taking last looks-round, giving last orders, and finding last things forgotten to be put into each locked or corded trunk.

A compartment had been secured in the Granville express; the big omnibus from the livery stables was or-

dered half an hour before the right time, so as to leave a margin for accidents; luncheon, on the same principle, would be served an hour in advance—Mabel, coming in and out of his room, assured Bryan that the family would move without a single hitch.

"It is so much better to have time to spare at the station than to run things too close," she said cheerfully.

Once she was able to sit and rest for two or three minutes; and in this pause from effort she spoke of public affairs.

"I haven't had a moment to glance at the papers, Bryan. But yesterday, in the train, there was an elderly clergyman who was quite like the fat boy in *Pickwick*, wanting to make our flesh creep."

"How did he do that?"

"Talking about war. Bryan, do deans wear gaiters? I think he was a dean—or an archdeacon, perhaps. Anyhow, he seemed rather important, and he talked quite nicely to us—but he said Germany was forcing a European war."

"Really? I can't believe that."

"No—but that reminds me, Bryan. Miss Hignet, thinking you were coming with us, sent an order to Smiths' to deliver all the papers at Westgate from tomorrow morning. I had better tell them to deliver the *Times* and *Daily Mail* here till further notice."

"Oh, no, don't trouble."

"Then you must tell Saunders what you want."

Soon after mid-day the loading of the omnibus began, and in due course it lumbered away with the luggage and the servants. Then after a time the car stood at the door. Miss Hignet and the children were stowed inside; Mabel, clinging to him in a last good-bye, was urged by young Jack not to risk missing the train.

"Good-bye, daddy. Good-bye."

As the car carried them away Bryan waved his hand and thought that in this world he would never see them again.

XVI

“PEOPLE don’t *do* such things.” He was thinking of Ibsen’s play and what Assessor Brack says when Hedda kills herself. From the artistic point of view he had always disliked the cutting of a cleverly-devised tangle by a self-inflicted death, had always felt that a suicide is never really convincing. He thought of suicides in the best contemporary work. Was there a single case—including the masterly two in Sir Arthur Pinero’s plays—which made you believe that it was inevitable and that it would have happened in real life? You may be satisfied at the moment, the stage illusion may compel a transient belief, but when you think it over afterwards you cannot any more believe in it. Hedda Gabler came in and said she let off the pistol to frighten them; the wife in *Mid Channel* only tumbled her cloak over the balcony, and will have many more nagging matches with her husband; the second Mrs. Tanqueray, in sober fact, was finally divorced by Mr. T., married again, and is living at Brighton. No, however well devised, suicide fails in fiction. It is not true. People don’t *do* such things.

Yet he was going to do it.

In these days he drifted on a sea of thought always drawing nearer to the thing itself. He scarcely left the house, scarcely noted the passing hours; the days were all one to him; Saturday, Sunday, bank-holiday had no meaning for him; night and daylight mingled themselves; his dreams were now all woven from the same thought-

material. Awake or asleep he was held by the one dominant idea.

His only doubt concerned the manner in which it should be done. He must do it so that neither Mabel nor anyone else would ever guess. Probably the simplest way, the way with least machinery, would prove the best. Veronal, sulphonal—get one of those drugs and take an overdose—write the day before, perhaps, and tell Mabel that he was suffering from headache or sleeplessness and meant to buy something to cure it—tell Saunders, too, that his head was aching, and ask not to be disturbed in the morning. That would be the way. No one would ever suspect; it would seem the common, eternally repeated accident; it would need no intricate planning of circumstances. But in his dreams he did it in other ways; or, rather, in dream after dream he was trying to do it and always failing. He was blowing his brains out, and the gun roared like a cannon, hot flames rushed over him; he was falling over a terrific cliff, and he fell from ledge to ledge, battered and broken, crashing through brushwood, bounding with sledge-hammer blows from rock to rock; he was throwing himself off a ship, drowning himself, gasping, suffocated, drowning; he was getting run over by a railway-train that came tearing down upon him with the fury of a whirlwind and the noise of an earthquake. He woke agonised, perspiring, choking, but with his resolution unshaken even while the horror of the dream remained strong and real. And when he fell asleep it was to dream that he was trying again.

Sometimes in the quiet and emptiness of the house he passed now from room to room like a ghost. Already he had detached himself from life; he scarcely belonged any more to the external world; he was bidding good-

bye to each familiar object that had helped to make up the illusion of reality to which he used to cling. He clung to it no longer. Every hour the illusion was weakening, growing thinner and more vague. He picked up things, handled them, looked at them; but their aspect had changed, the very feel of them was different, and he received the faint messages that they gave with a wondering interest in which there was but the slightest warmth of emotion. The emotional sensations came only when by an internal effort he evoked memories; they did not arise, as normally they would have done, in response to the stimulus from without. Thus, as he pottered about the room with the tennis-rackets and golf-clubs, he purposely recalled the thrills and pleasures that had been so long connected mentally with the use of these instruments. Was it possible that they had meant so much to him—these clumsy, artificial antennæ by the aid of which the insect, game-playing man, extends his means of contact with the realm of matter?

In the same manner, voluntarily exciting the zone of memory, he went from shelf to shelf among his books; and, as he picked up and opened a volume here and there, he recalled how and when he had bought it, the pleasure he had derived from it, or the use to which he had put it. His was a craftsman's library, and many of the books had been acquired for special purposes; they were the working tools that had served him well and would not again be employed. He lingered for half a morning in front of his long shelf of presentation copies, reading the inscriptions, thinking of the men who had sent the gifts to him with such kind words and in so kind a spirit. His fellow-craftsmen had been very good to him, welcoming him at once to their brotherhood, treating him as an equal before he had earned any right to such treat-

ment. These books of theirs, given to him in friendliness and good fellowship, formed a testimonial to character of which he had felt proud.

The house now had recovered its old proportions. No longer dwarfed by comparisons with bigger houses, it was again large and fine. The dining-room would seat twenty-four people comfortably, and it had regularly seated many more without serious discomfort. He thought of the Sunday parties, summoned all the familiar faces, and the room filled itself with ghosts. He looked out into the empty verandah where the extra tables used to be laid; and without effort now he could see the bright lamp-lit faces, hear the babel of voices, the clatter of knives and forks, with the summer night behind it all, dark but free of mystery, more beautiful perhaps than the day, but as innocent. Young and old, these vanished guests had liked him, had been glad to come here, and were happy when they came. And he had been proud and happy because he was their host. What more could a sane man desire? How just and well-founded had been his pride in it all! It was a beautiful, a splendid home till he himself became unworthy of it.

Thinking so, he felt no self-pity, only self-contempt.

He thought of his reputation as a playwright. It was immeasurably higher, especially of late, than he had either deserved or had hoped for. His too indulgent critics had given him fame of a particular and uncommon kind; saying the same kind things always, they had built the solid pedestal for him to stand on, and he stood upon it high and firm, nobody ever trying to shake it or knock him off it. He was the recognised advocate for domestic morality. He was the teacher of the too-often forgotten truth that in all the relations between the sexes honesty is the best policy. He was the apostle of clean

living. "There is something at once elevated and elevating in the pictures of home-life painted for us by Mr. Vaile." "More than any writer of the century Mr. Vaile has succeeded in vividly presenting love at its strongest and yet at its purest. In Mr. Vaile's new play the love of the husband and wife, separated so cruelly but brought together again with such consummate art, strikes a note of beauty and truth that will find its echo in every English heart." That was the sort of thing, repeated again and again, that had set him on his pedestal and kept him there. He had known that he valued this special reputation, but he had not known till now how great was its value to him. So much that he simply could not face the loss of it.

Logically, of course, he ought not to be in any danger of losing it, whatever happened to him; the plays would remain untouched; the finished piece of art must be judged solely on its merits, and the private life of the artist has nothing whatever to do with it. Suppose it became known that Mr. Vaile was an unfaithful husband, it should not in any way detract from the force of the lesson if Mr. Vaile's next play showed the necessity of faithfully keeping the marriage vow. You need not be a soldier to paint a battle-piece; the best book on religion may be written by a man who never goes to church. Critics understand this perfectly, but the public don't understand it at all. In the public mind there is a confusion of ideas that makes the worker and his work all one. They insist that the worker shall live up to his work, they believe that he always lives down to it; they refuse to listen to a preacher who does not practise all that he preaches. He understood well how infallibly any scandal or evil repute that befell him himself would at once destroy his popular fame and rob all his work of

the effect of sincerity and genuineness. He could not continue writing on such terms. The critics would not "go back on him"; they would not by any allusion drag his secrets into the cold light of print; they would merely have their quiet laugh among themselves; but unconsciously they would treat him with less respect than of old. Unintentionally, not by a single unkind word, but by the subtle change of tone and manner, they would remind him from time to time that people who live in glass houses should not throw rhetorical stones. Enemies naturally would rejoice in his downfall, and would be careful to see that the editor of *Tom-tits* was informed as to its sordid details. No, he could not live now without his pedestal. The man on the pedestal had never really been himself; yet he, the actual Bryan Vaile, had grown so accustomed to him that he could not do without him.

And he fell to thinking of psychology, not in relation to the soul or any imperishable essence that may have before it a future beyond the grave, but as to the mental states that make up our earthly life and are certainly extinguished by death. He remembered what William James says about the various selves of which each individual is composed—the ideal self, the actual self, and so on—and how the whole aggregate suffers and feels the diminution if any one of the selves is attacked.

Then that phantom self, the Vaile of popular esteem, the self that had been built up by inference from his published work, was truly a part of him. It was, one might say, the man he wished to be.

There was also the self that consisted of what Mabel thought him—the chivalrous knight, the genius, the unsullied spirit—the man that he could never have been. Nothing even remotely like that self had ever existed;

and yet for the sake of it he was prepared to die. His death would preserve it intact in Mabel's mind.

There was the light-comedy self which he never treated seriously, and yet for which he had a sneaking kindness—the man who, like *Peter Pan*, had refused to grow up, who cherished trifles and neglected business, who was absurdly elated when children laughed at his jokes, who suffered agonies when he played golf badly, who idled away whole mornings when he ought to have been hard at work, who promised to make up for lost time in the evening and after all sent a telephone message to say he was dining at the Gridiron Club and would not be back till late.

There was, fatally, the self that belonged to Diana; the worthless wretch of whom he did not want to think any more—the miserable self which, if not promptly suppressed, would tear the whole fabric of him to shreds and tatters.

And behind these, lying deeper, there was the only self with any real solidity. This was the very commonplace Bryan Vaile of a few firm, strong convictions—the self that could not bear to cause pain, that recognised benefits received and did not repudiate debts owed, that had sympathy for other people and honestly tried to understand them, that believed men ought to live cleanly and decently, that meant to do so and would pardon no failure in itself, although not too hard on failure in others. This, glorified by kindness, was perhaps the self that his friends knew and were good enough to like. They glorified, they over-estimated the humble qualities that it possessed; but, allowing for the over-estimate, there was something of virtue in it. He had always known so—pleading it as excuse for obvious shortcomings. He was not a bad sort, really.

He thought of how his friends had trusted him. They had come to him in trouble, opening their hearts to him; asking his counsel on points of honour; confessing their weakness and saying they leant upon his strength; even getting him to arbitrate in delicate domestic wrangles because they knew, or rather thought, he was a good husband and a good father. Girls and boys believed in him, felt that he wished them well and meant to help them. Mothers trusted him, believing that their daughters were as safe with him as if they had been in church. He thought of old Vince and McCallum, of Madame St. Cloud. They would fight for him if anyone told them that he had disgraced himself. When they found it was true they would feel as if disgraced themselves. He could not forfeit their trustful belief in him; he could not do without their friendship. He imagined old Vince writing to him: "Sir Ronald Vince presents his compliments, and regrets that neither he nor his family can accept Mr. Vaile's invitation." He imagined McCallum speaking to him: "I'll be verra frank with ye, Vaile. To my mind ye've made a beast of yourself, and it's for that I did not move to ye and cannot shak' hands wi' ye." In imagination he saw the tears and paint run down Madame St. Cloud's cheeks as she wept over him. "Bryanne, it has hurt me here"—and she put her hands on her bosom—"to think of how you have stabbed the lovv of Mabelle."

Yes, this was the self that must drink veronal sooner than sink to trickery, treachery, and lies.

But it was not only that he had put himself on trial, given judgment, and pronounced sentence, he was tired of himself. Weariness as well as hopelessness compelled him. He was tired of the aggregate self and the compo-

nent selfs. The phenomenon known as Bryan Vaile had lasted long enough, and must now cease.

To-day, Tuesday, had glided by in a dim twilight, and throughout the day he had scarcely thought at all. When people spoke to him their voices sounded as if from a distance, and it was some time before he understood the meaning of what was said. At his evening meal the servant spoke to him, and he made her repeat her question. Noticing that he did not eat, she had asked if he would like any different dishes. Then she asked him if he felt ill, and he replied that he was suffering from a headache.

He had procured the drug now—with the assistance of a local doctor's prescription and two chemists' shops. He had written to his wife, telling her about the headache and his purchase of palliatives. The letter would be posted to-morrow morning. Then, to-morrow night, the thing would happen. To-morrow night, wishing for relief from pain, for rest, for sleep, he would accidentally take an overdose of his medicine. To-morrow night he would sleep as men sleep when they are so tired that they never want to wake again.

But in the morning, when Saunders brought him his tea, she lingered after pulling up the blinds and letting in the warm sunshine. She was anxious to talk of the news.

"Here's the *Daily Mail*, sir. I thought you'd like to see it."

"Thanks."

"I hope your headache's better, sir."

"About the same, thank you."

"I suppose you know the war's begun, sir?"

"What's that?"

"Oh, yes, sir. It's quite right. You'll see it in the *Mail*. England and Germany have been at war ever since last night."

The war had broken out, shaking the universe to pieces, swamping all individual woe in the tears and blood of mankind.

And Bryan Vaile jumped at it, as if it had been made for him—escape and death. So easy now; so decent; so gloriously more simple than his own device, which, after all, might have been botched and bungled. He would go to the war and get killed.

XVII

AT ONE or two barracks they asked him none too politely if he couldn't see they were busy; at several newly-opened recruiting-offices they laughed at him rather rudely because he was so much too old. But soon he managed it, by the simple expedient of giving his age as twenty-nine; and three days afterwards he was sleeping in a tent with nine others—not sleeping, trying to sleep, learning how to rest on wooden boards.

The preliminary training was so severe that he could barely stand it. In it there was no time for thought; or the little that one could think was of the war. The wonderful stupendous war took possession of him and of everybody else. The war had saved him from himself. It would use him for a little while, and then wipe him out.

Diana had thrown herself into the war also. She wrote to him three or four times—once, asking if he would like to join her in Red Cross work; then to say it was splendid of him to have enlisted. "But of course they must make you an officer." Then a little later she wrote from Paris, telling him that she had inaugurated a small hospital there and was soon going to start a larger one near the coast. Then they ceased to correspond, and he heard no more of her; but while enjoying a glass of beer at a little pub within bounds of the camp he was shown a picture of her in the *Tatter*. She was dressed as a Red Cross nurse; and his pal said, handing him the beer-stained periodical across the table, "That's a nice piece, ole sport, to tuck yer up and make yer cumfy. Duchess, too!"

After about two months they gave him a commission, and he was posted to the 8th Battalion of a famous regiment. Because of his age they had made him a lieutenant to begin with, so that things might be a little easier for him, but because of his age it was all horribly difficult to him. He was just twenty-five years too old to learn with facility, and very often he felt like Bultitude Senior in Mr. Anstie's immortal fantasy, when forced to go back to the boarding-school instead of his own son. As a private soldier he nearly died from fatigue; as an officer he nearly went mad from the sense of responsibility. But in fact, though he did not know it, he soon won approval, and ran no real danger of being kicked out for decrepitude or getting left behind for incompetence.

When the happy time came they slipped across quietly at night, from a port that they might not mention to a port that you should not guess; and their story over the water was very likely the story of other battalions of the new armies.

Out on the cobble-stones of the French town, with the dear French people at shop doors kissing their hands to them; out on the hot, straight French roads through the endless perspective of tall trees; marching easy now; seeing French troops in lorries, queer French wagons, French peasants in the French fields. One thousand and seven of them all told, a noble long column, and every one of them feeling the uplift. Eight or nine months ago they had been book-keepers, accountants, ploughmen, auctioneers' clerks, playwrights, and so on; and now they were soldiers come to France to fight in a just cause. From the band sergeant at the head of the column to the transport sergeant at the rear, there was not one unworthy thought; except in the mind of Bryan Vaile, who mingled vainglory with the loftier joy that all felt, say-

ing to himself, "I am preposterously the oldest subaltern in France. But I have made good. I can do what the boys are doing; I can stick it as well as the youngest of them." And perhaps this thought was not so very unworthy; or at any rate, it wasn't as unworthy as the thoughts he used to entertain before the war began.

So they marched, day after day, and the battalion was one's family, one's mother and father, one's wife and child; the four travelling kitchens with their fat, heavy draught horses formed the domestic hearth, the smoke of their chimneys was like incense, and one's hunger at the mid-day halt was religion—a devout yearning desire, without creed or dogma, which all shared. The sun warmed them, the west wind powdered them with white dust, the rain drenched them to the skin. If they lay down wet at night they woke up dry in the morning. They slept in barns, in factories, in the open fields; but sooner or later the sun shone, always to-morrow's grub came rolling behind them, and high noon brought the steaming stew-kettles along the roadside. Freshness, novelty, still made the commonest things seem bright and gay. All ranks talked like young honeymoon couples, counting life from the happy day—their first billets; their first bivouac, their second night on a brick floor; their seventy-third village. They reminded each other that this time last week they were on Salisbury Plain, and only ten days ago they were drawing stores at Tidworth. One night they lay down and listened. It was their first sound of the guns. That night they could not sleep, because they knew they were near the front now.

By the autumn they were veterans. After much experience they had settled down in that delightful romantic part of the line which ran through the once

charming but now ruined village of Anonvilliers, with the still charming and quite uninjured village of Sainte Chose just behind them for their intervals of rest and relaxation. Between these two villages they oscillated comfortably throughout the winter.

While in the line they paid all proper attention to business; for their beloved brigadier wished them to twist the enemy's tail as much as possible, and was avid for the collection of specimens of him, especially live ones. The 8th were not lucky in bringing him back alive, although they tried their very hardest. Nevertheless, they gained kudos for their explorations; and Lieut. Vaile showed aptitude on patrols, and made some solitary efforts in search of useful intelligence that brought him credit.

With working-parties it was observed that he walked and stood on top when he ought perhaps to have kept under cover in the trench; and, although his men did not think the worse of him for this, the colonel once spoke with disapproval, telling him that to take unnecessary risks was "unsoldierlike."

"You shouldn't behave as if you wanted to commit suicide."

"No, sir."

"I don't want my officers to *prove* they are brave men. I take that for granted."

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't join the Army for the purpose of chucking your life away, but to serve your king and country. All this that we have seen so far is child's play."

"Yes, sir."

"But there'll be work next year—when the advance begins. Well, then, no one has the right to get killed through his own stupidity or carelessness."

"No, sir."

Even when out of the line, revelling in the quiet of Sainte Chose, they were not idle. Beyond their incessant labours in digging, there was much drill, much route-marching, and much practise of attacks.

All this was soldiering, but outside of duty there was so much to make existence agreeable. There was comradeship, for instance; the growing regard for one's brother officers; a fondness for them, a delight in them, that surpassed reason and baffled analysis — something like an obedience to a law of nature which has ordained that until you have lain down in the mud with somebody, stirred uneasily on a brick floor with him, dug holes in the ground with him, and been many, many times wet through with him, you cannot be really fond of him. And finer, more tender than one's love of the officers, was one's ever-deepening love of the men. They were such splendid fellows, good as children, with hearts that simply could not harbour a grouse. It stirred one to one's depths just to see their faces by candlelight as they lay in the barn one had tried to make weather-tight for them, to watch them as they filed up to the cooks at dinner with their mess-tins in their hands, to hear them answer in the daylight, or the darkness, or the dusk, when you asked them if they were all right.

"All right, thank you, sir."

It filled one with a pride ineffable to think that they liked one, trusted one, and would follow where one led.

Another cause of personal contentment, which all recognised, was one's extraordinarily perfect physical health. Even the youngest of them recognised this. One was so well bodily that one had no sensation of possessing a body at all. It was there, but it took care of itself now; it ceased to talk to one, interrupting amusing con-

versations by saying, "I am so tired. I want to stop walking"; or "I have got indigestion again." It did not even tell you it was hungry; if you gave it no dinner or sleep it never complained. When a meal came along there seemed to be just a flaming pit beneath the Sam Browne belt, into which you pitched what there was—bully beef, dog-biscuits, greasy slabs of hot, fat stew, anything—and the flame blazed and subsided, and there was the end of that. One *could* eat; and *how* one slept, too, when the chance came!

Mentally, a hundred benefits that one had also yearned for were received during the process of this wonderful health cure that fate and chance had set going out here in France. There was a profound comfort in having got down to essentials at last—not to be cumbered with personal property, not to be called on to think; to know always what you had to do and that you always jolly well had to do it. This meant really the boon and blessing of being able to forget yourself almost entirely. The young could quite forget. For the middle-aged there lingered only the pleasant remembrance that you were not on the shelf, not played out, but being in it with the younger generation. While to the elderly party who had led a hitherto secluded or sedentary life there was a satisfaction in the achievement of something adventurous; for, however dull or tame the routine of each day might seem, the spirit of adventure could be detected as glorifying, *justifying* the ordered task and common round. And without doubt the nobler, better thoughts were always strengthening. To live for others, to die for others, to sacrifice all things for the just cause—this as a settled aim necessarily elevated and improved those who had never had a settled aim of any kind till now.

Bryan Vaile felt all this, but at the back of his mind

he still had the thought that, apart from the cause, for strictly private reasons, he was not only willing but fully intending to finish here, and not come out of it alive.

Meanwhile he was happy and at peace. All his old interests, the little world of his inventions, the importance of literary work, had gone utterly. The Bryan Vaile of pre-war epochs was an inconceivable personage. He scarcely remembered his feebleness and vacillation, his fretfulness and triviality; he read about him occasionally in the newspapers, and saw with interest that a play of his called *Penelope's Dilemma* had been acted for nearly two years, and that another of his plays called *Evelyn Lestrangle* was enjoying a record run as a revival. Letters and documents concerning this playwright bored him so much that he could not trouble to answer them. The only time that the new Bryan Vaile could spare for letter-writing was when, like every other married man out here, he wrote to tell his wife that he was well and in no danger. The only theatre that he cared about or valued was the barn where the divisional concert-party sang their songs and acted their revues.

He sent his men to this theatre, and would cheerfully walk four miles in the mud and rain with other subalterns to attend the first night of a new programme. Seated on a bench with Jarvis, Donaldson, Blackburn, and the rest, he thought it the wittiest, brightest, most entrancing show that he had ever witnessed. He sniggered with them, roared with them, suffocated with them; he firmly believed, as they firmly believed, that Private Bull and Lance-Corporal Hooper were as good as Mr. George Robey and Miss Violet Lorraine.

Comradeship — that was the clean, white magic that made small things great. Anyone can laugh when a whole battalion is laughing. Everything is a treat when your comrades make it so.

XVIII

ON A BRIGHT December day Lieutenant Vaile was given a duty ride which was also an absolute joy-ride.

The battalion was coming out of the line to-morrow; the men must be paid without delay; therefore an officer had to be sent down to headquarters of the Army Corps to find the Field Cashier and bring back money.

The Transport Officer provided a good horse, and Vaile, getting upon its back just when the sun had risen over the German front trenches, rode through the darkness by the ruined houses, and down into the twilight by the engineers' dug-outs, past the battery, and out upon the desolate waste. The crop of gross vegetation that had arisen since the land had been abandoned by its cultivators was girth-high; it was about two miles broad, stretching to right and left interminably; and the long, low rays of the sun, lighting its surface now, made it look exactly like what it must once have been—corn-fields with the ears of corn just changed from green to yellow. It was intersected by tracks used by the regimental limbers, and until Vaile found his track he rode slowly and cautiously, because of the innumerable pitfalls offered by disused trenches, rusting wire, and so forth. Then, as he hit the track, there came a sound like the swish of large invisible whips; he had an impression of quantities of snakes diving at lightning speed into the tangle of weeds, and his little horse made a shy of panic. It was only a spurt of machine-gun fire, aimed at our

front line, but drifting over everything and dropping here. Indeed, this was a place where one never lingered.

Vaile and the little horse cantered away gaily. Ahead, the bare tree-tops of Sainte Chose were pale yellow, the windmill glittered whitely, and the high ground towards the Arras road caught the sunlight.

And he thought suddenly: Was it wrong to be so happy? Was it wicked to be joyous and light-hearted while so many wept? Was he a monster of selfishness and egoism secretly to like the war; secretly to treat it as though it had been made for his benefit; secretly to bless it, because by its stark realities it had destroyed the sickly dream that oppressed him, saving him from shame and disgrace, cleansing him and fortifying him, because it had put Diana back in her place—the impalpable realm of dreams and fancies?

On this long ride he tried to think seriously; and once or twice, in the intervals between immense lapses of sheer enjoyment, he succeeded in doing so.

The day grew brighter and brighter—it was quite warm, like October. Pausing on the high ground near gun positions, he looked back at the line. It was in full view for six or seven miles, except where hidden by shattered villages, and yet really nothing was visible. If you knew exactly where it was, as he did, you could make out here and there, at the nearest points, some streaks on the faded verdure, made by the spoil dug out of the trenches, and on hill-slopes some white marks that showed where the ground was chalky. But it required a strong effort of the imagination to see, mentally, all the men hidden in the ground—thousands, with their heads only a few inches below the level of that broad, empty, sunlit surface; thousands and thousands facing each other, watching and killing, put there only to tear the life out of the

men who faced them. This *was* the war—the business part of it—the only part that really mattered.

He turned his back on it and jogged on; by roads now, all full of traffic, with military police at every corner to regulate it—troops marching, endless strings of horses returning from watering, and an unbroken stream of lorries.

A ride down from the line always did one good by shaking one out of one's purely local ideas. As one moved backwards the whole scheme opened out. He passed through the areas of two other divisions after leaving his own, and always the same thing repeated itself—battalion orderly rooms, quartermasters' stores, fields with transport horses and wagons, village streets with platoons holding their arms at the port for inspection by platoon commanders. Villages that contained brigade headquarters appeared to be smarter and cleaner than other villages; and when one came to a large village containing the headquarters of a division, it was so clean, so grand, and so quiet that one hardly dared to ride into it, even at a walk.

One rode on, through village after village, for mile after mile, until at the bottom of a hill, by a river, a pretty spick-and-span little town with spires and a medieval belfry lay gently twinkling in the sunlight. And this was Corps Headquarters. Its majestic pomp took one's breath away; it seemed sacrilege to push on farther, and the military police obviously thought so. The number of offices and their names froze one's blood; the cleanness of the streets made one blink; the splendour and profuse display of staff officers frightened one into gauche and unnoticed salutes at every few yards' progress. For whereas staff officers at the division were only colonels, these all seemed to be brigadier-generals. The click and

slap of the sentry outside the gates of the Corps Commander's park made Vaile and his horse shy together. Nothing but the sense of duty enabled one to go on with it.

After watering and feeding his horse he found the Field Cashier seated in a neat little room like a bank parlour. With overwhelming rapidity the cashier paid him out the many thousands of francs required by the battalion. The money was all neatly tied up in bundles of notes like packs of playing-cards; and it just filled the two large haversacks carried by Vaile, one over each shoulder. He had a third smaller haversack with his lunch in it.

This was the accomplishment of half his duty; the other half was of a more embarrassing nature. His commanding officer had directed him to fish out the general's aide-de-camp and talk to him quietly and diplomatically about a motor-car. Strictly, battalion commanders should not talk about cars at all. According to the book, they have nothing whatever to do with cars and should not even think about them. If they are absolutely forced to speak of a car, they should speak to the proper quarter, that is, to their Brigade; and if the Brigade chooses it can speak of it to Division. Nothing could well be more irregular or improper than to short-circuit in this manner and mention the word "car" to Corps; but as the colonel knew all this quite well he had said to Bryan, "Use diplomacy. I am sure you won't make an ass of yourself."

Feeling not nearly so sure as the colonel, Bryan faced another salute from the sentry, swaggered into the park with a false bravado, and, engaging in the avenue behind the sentry's back, carefully wiped mud off his boots on the wet grass under the trees. Then he attacked the

general's château. It was appallingly grand, and as there was nobody about to guide him he plunged through a hall, tapped at a door, received no answer, and went in. The room was lofty, gilded, with cheval glasses, like a scene in the highest class of French comedy, and it seemed to swim round and round before Vaile's eyes because it was so full of red tabs and gold lace. When it steadied itself he saw that there were only two brigadier-generals and three colonels stooping over some large maps spread out on the table. For a few moments they did not see him, and in this time he saw himself in one of the glasses.

Anything that looked more incongruous it would have been impossible to imagine. Mud-stained, absurdly bulky, hung round with his haversacks, his gas helmet, field-glasses on one side of his belt and a huge revolver on the other, he was like a highwayman who had burst in to threaten the nobility. He changed the key-note, he destroyed the scene, he dropped everything to the level of a Drury Lane melodrama. But, after all, there was really nothing to feel ashamed of in looking like an infantryman just out of the line. He felt this in the midst of his confusion of spirit, and stood up very straight and stiff as he stated his business. He said he wanted to see the A. D. C., to ask him something.

"Which one?"

He said he had no instructions as to which A. D. C.

"He'd better see Derwent," said one of the generals. "That other fellow never knows anything"; and they sent for Captain Derwent.

They were altogether charming to him, these nuts. They asked who he was, and where he came from, and they knew all about the battalion. They asked him to have a drink and said he had better stay for lunch. But what flabbergasted him was their absolutely uncanny

knowledge about the line. He knew that the red-hats came up to look at it, because he had seen them at Anonvillers going round with his own general; but from the things they said you might suppose that they lived there; or they lived down here, but kept their astral bodies up there watching you.

"Tell me," said one general, "what work you have done this fortnight."

"How far are you up Newmarket Avenue?" asked the other, naming a communication trench.

"Have you finished revetting Long Bottom Lane?"

"Has that fellow, what's his name? Manders? Manvill, yes—has he come back from the Musketry School?"

"Are you getting all the whale oil that you asked for?"

They knew subalterns' names; they knew what the quartermaster had said about whale oil; they knew *everything*. It filled one with amazement and awe.

Then somebody said that the A. D. C. wished him to go upstairs to his bedroom; and the generals said, "Good-morning, Vaile—if you won't stay to lunch."

Captain Derwent's room was under the roof, but it seemed very attractive and cosy when you came to it straight from a dug-out. It had armchairs, an old French escritoire, and a circular window through which you saw the park and an ornamental lake. Captain Derwent himself was very young and very smart, and woefully bored with life at headquarters. He exhibited none of the jovial friendliness that had been shown by the generals and colonels downstairs; but Vaile had the feeling that this young man was not really a stranger, that they had met before somewhere at some time. He asked Vaile politely enough how he could be of service.

Vaile wished to know if by chance, while the Battalion was at Sainte Chose, it could, would, and might be pos-

sible to give his colonel the use of a car one afternoon, or say from the afternoon to the following morning.

"If he's going on leave," said Captain Derwent, "I should think the Division would send him down to Boulogne."

Vaile explained that the colonel had already been on leave; what he wanted now was to go to Amiens for certain weighty purposes.

But the delicate mission took a bad turn.

Captain Derwent assured Vaile that he often could not get a car for his own use, and in this connection he spoke very disparagingly of the Camp Commandant. "The old devil always swears that half his axles are broken. But, between you and me and the post, if he gave cars to everybody who applies for them, we couldn't run the show. You have no idea how many people ask for cars."

"My C. O. quite understood that it would be a favour."

"Just so. And I'm sure we'd be only too glad. Only there you are, don't you see"; and Captain Derwent looked as if he would die of boredom if the conversation went on much longer.

Vaile remembered now where he had previously met Captain Derwent. It was at Middlesborough House. He was the young soldier, addressed by Diana as Geoffrey, who had lunched there one day in the dim vague time before the war. Vaile did not want to recall this meeting; he did not want to claim acquaintance with anyone who knew Diana. And yet a bond between himself and Geoffrey, however slender, might still save the diplomatic negotiations from the almost certain failure that was hanging over him. The weak spot in the mission—plainly realised by the ambassador—had been the insufficient quality of his credentials. He stood silent, hesitat-

ing. It would be dreadful to have to ride back and tell the colonel he had failed.

Geoffrey made a despairing gesture and offered him a cigarette.

Vaile hesitated no longer. He reminded Geoffrey of that luncheon-party at the Duchess of Middlesborough's. And Geoffrey came to life instantly. He jumped at the human link; he recognised the bond between two people who had eaten a meal together in England, in the happy, happy time before all this intolerable boredom began. Moreover, he betrayed the fact that he was an immense admirer of the duchess, in a boyish effervescent way.

"Isn't she a topper? Doesn't she knock spots off almost everybody you ever saw?"

He had seen her quite recently; and he described how he and his general had been down to the coast to visit a sick friend at her hospital, and how she had given them tea and fascinated "the old man."

"Look here"; and skipping about the room, he produced a folding leather case with four photographs of pretty ladies, one of which was the duchess. "It's an old one. I bought it. She has promised to give me a new one. There. Aren't they four tip-toppers?"

Vaile admired the lovely four, put the case down reverently, and adverted to that question about a car.

The car? Oh, yes, the car would be all right. Anything for a pal, don't you know. Geoffrey would make that old devil produce one. "Any day— You telephone to me. Look here. Ask for the A. D. C. Say the Camp Commandant may go to blazes—you want the A. D. C. I'll tell my stable companion, so that he'll do it, if I'm out. And look here, I'll come over to see you. I'll look you up at your place."

They went downstairs like bosom friends. At a cer-

tain stage of the descent, on the first floor, at the end of a noble corridor, one had a dreadful feeling that one was very near the Corps Commander now; that he was behind one of those closed doors; that he might bob out on one if one loitered. Lieutenant Vaile did not loiter.

He went away feeling extraordinarily elated, because he had succeeded and the colonel would be pleased with him.

He lunched immediately, in the parlour behind a small estaminet; and while eating his sandwiches he thought of the ascending scale and the opening scheme as one goes backwards. Behind the line, Headquarters of Brigade, Division, Corps; behind this, only a little way farther, another town with Army Headquarters, bigger, grander than this, with major-generals instead of brigadiers as principal staff officers; behind that, General Headquarters, teeming, one must suppose, with lieutenant-generals, a city of offices, a labyrinth of departments; and behind that—Downing Street. And all of them, all the way back, working hard to keep the business going—that is, to put him and his forty N. C. O.'s and men, or another forty exactly like them, in and out of Newmarket Avenue, or some other trench somewhere that anyone might mistake for it.

Then he mounted his horse. He rode down the scale now, and the short winter day was over when he reached Sainte Chose and handed his money to the Transport Officer for safe keeping. The Transport Officer gave him tea and another horse, and they rode up together to the trenches with the limbered wagons and to-morrow's grub.

The night was so dark that one wondered how the little procession of mules and wagons could find its way when once it had left the road and was crossing the waste.

At any rate, one would reach the line somewhere, even if one missed one's own part of it, for along its whole length, at brief intervals of time, the German star-lights rose and glowed and faded. This would go on all night—a dismal fireworks display, a pallid, silent entertainment that might have been devised by the ghosts of dead men to scare away all living holiday-makers. When one drew nearer and came within range of these phantom rockets, the effect was wonderful. Suddenly, as a star rose, the black protecting veil of night was lifted, the whole desolate scene sprang into view. One saw the village ruins close ahead of one, and the wide plain for a mile at least on either hand, with leafless, sundered trees, a pile of stones that had been a windmill, some mounds beside old gun positions—all seen as in a preternaturally long flash of lightning; looking like Macbeth's blasted heath, like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*, like nothing on earth or that should ever have been on earth. And while the lightning lasted the little procession of wagons seemed a huge, conspicuous affair; every detail showed large and clear—the drivers' intent faces, the crossbars of the poles, the buckles of the harness, the twitching ears of the mules as they plodded on with grave unconcern. A moment ago one had felt a tiny thing lost in vast space; now one felt enormous, perched high in the air on a horse as big as a monument. Surely one *must* be observed and picked off. Then the light faded; one was smaller than ever, and blinded now, a poor little insect without eyes moving forward only by instinct.

It was a quiet night, with only occasional bursts of rifle-fire, and they found their way comfortably; up through the orchards by the pitfalls, up into the street, all among the friendly, familiar surroundings. Another pallid flare lit up the whole street—masses of tumbled

brick and stone, garden walls, skeleton villas with dangling roof-frames, the shell of the church tower, mean little sheds and hutches, and muddy, weary men slowly flitting like ghosts here and there. But these ruins had no forbidding aspect; they meant battalion headquarters, signal office, company office, cookhouse, mess-room, what not; there was cheerful candlelight showing now from holes in the ground; well-known voices sounded. Bryan Vaile felt that it was like coming home—after his happy day.

They made much of him to-night; the colonel asking him to dinner because he had not made an ass of himself, all enjoying his society because he had been seeing sights. The kindness of their welcome made his heart glow. This was where he wanted to be, in this dug-out, in the line; not anywhere farther back. But he remembered the excursion with interest and pleasure, thinking again of all that lay behind him and his platoon, Brigade, Division, Corps; behind that, Army, G. H. Q., Downing Street—and behind that, the tears and anguish of thousands and thousands of bereaved mothers, sweethearts, wives.

Albert the 8th Battalion lay down to sleep in the open. Six officers, including the colonel and the adjutant, and ninety-seven other ranks. That was the battalion now.

It was over five hundred strong again ten days later, when it had pulled itself together. Big drafts had been sent to them, new young officers had arrived in limber-loads, and some of the slightly wounded had rejoined. Then the division marched away northwards, back through peaceful inhabited villages, where the sound of the guns grew faint; marching by day, in billets at night, the same old game; up north, to take over a quiet sector.

The battalion was still everything, and they tried not to think that it was another battalion. They tried not to think of all the officers and men who had landed with it in France. They could not speak of the dead comrades that they loved, and they tried not to think of them. These were gone; their battalion remained. One must think of it always as the old battalion.

But in one's dreams one knew what had really happened. In dreams one lived again those ten minutes during which the battalion took Signal Copse and went up in smoke and flame for ever. In dreams one saw the full muster—a thousand brave, strong souls; boys and men, giving up home, comfort, love; toiling as they had never toiled before; tramping under rain and snow, sleeping in the mud, watching through the nights; for two long years preparing themselves for the sacrifice; painfully working towards it stage by stage, waiting their turn; and then showing the world what they were—for ten minutes.

XXI

THE war was lasting too long. So many had promised themselves that when it ended they would begin life again with a new spirit, caring only for essentials, working for the reward that lies in work itself, being content with little, knowing that much is not required for happiness. But it did not end. It went on, and its dead weight sometimes crushed all these aspirations out of one.

The battalion had lost its colonel — the head of the family, their father. He had been made a brigadier. But they had their beloved general still. Vaile was now doing odd jobs for him at brigade headquarters, and had been praised for being useful.

He was back with the battalion that autumn when they went south again for the fighting on the Ancre; and in comparison with these operations the battle of the Somme became a retrospect of ease and comfort. It was summer then, the sun shone, and there was firm ground under one's feet. But here, after the pitiless rains, in the fog and cold of November, men were called upon to move forward struggling through mud up to the knees, to scale hills that were sliding quagmires, and to fight desperately at the end of a journey that would have been torture and torment to accomplish if there had been nothing to do when they reached their destination. The dead disappeared in the mud; the wounded were suffocated by the mud; the living were often so tired that they would not move to escape from shell-fire if there was another

stretch of mud to be crossed in order to reach a safer place. Yet never had the army fought better. The cold and the mud and the misery could not stop them.

When this battle quieted down the brigade remained in the neighborhood for the winter.

Always the conditions were getting worse. The front line no longer consisted of snug and commodious trenches; it was a chain of posts in shell-holes, with such links of wire as could be made between them. It took hours to get men up for reliefs; whole platoons stuck fast, and other platoons sent to pull them out themselves stuck or lost their way. There was merciless rain by day, with frost and snow at night. Fog made patrol work dangerous. Raiding parties sent out to mop up German posts succeeded in their objective, captured the nest whole, and coming back, as they thought, with their prisoners, blundered headlong into the German line. The Germans returned this compliment rarely, as they were not adventurous and the harassing work was done by us; but deserters from the enemy were not uncommon, and it was refreshing to hear from them that the enemy were, if possible, more uncomfortable than we were. There were difficulties in feeding our advanced posts. Everything was difficult. When a battalion came out after doing its allotted time it was dreadful to see. The men were plastered from head to foot with wet or frozen mud, their faces were ashen grey; they looked as if they were the dead men rotting on the hills who had half come to life and were shambling away from the horror up there. Indeed, there was not much life left in the outcoming battalions.

Yet after forty-eight hours in the dripping huts or in the draughty barns of a dilapidated village they were themselves again, all brushed up and clean, with their

buttons polished and their faces shining if there was a pale gleam of sunlight; ready to spring to attention and for inspection port arms when the platoon commander came to look at their spotless rifles; ready to say "No complaints" as they filed past with their mess-tins at dinner; ready to go back and freeze and fight and die as soon as they were required to do it. They were wonderful, the new men seeming as stout and patient as the original men, although obviously the standard of physique was falling. With such men, it was not strange if platoon commanders loved them; it would have been odd if platoon commanders did not pray to be worthy of them. "Are you all right there?" "All right, thank you, sir." It would always be the same answer—the answer that touched one's heart from the first. "All right, sir—only up to my armpits in this mud for the last six hours." "All right, sir—only slightly wounded. Don't bother about me." "All right, sir—only blown to pieces and dying. Don't think of me, sir. Please go on, sir."

And nobody could feel aggrieved by being worse off than his neighbours. It was the same for all. In these times Brigade Headquarters oscillated between a sweating dug-out and sheds that would not have been luxurious for poultry; Headquarters of Division, instead of having an imposing château, lay in frail huts in the open; Corps itself was without glass to its windows and displayed shell-craters in lieu of flower-beds at its front door.

Always, too, one had the illusion of the happy past. Those who remembered it thought of that first idyllic winter at Sainte Chose. The vision of the sunlit heights, the gaiety, the excitement in the battle of the Somme, rose continually to introspective eyes. The long marches up and down France seemed to have been so easy; the

pavements and shop windows of inhabited towns, the billets with water-tight roofs, fires in kitchen stoves; estaminets where old women cooked breakfast and smiling girls laid the cloth—it was all so bright and jolly when one looked back at it. And the sun would shine again; the good times would come again. This was just a dull phase, and one must stick it cheerfully. Those brutes who had let loose all the misery on an innocent world were tasting it themselves. Their legend of being supermen was shattered for ever. They had been fought and beaten by the jobbing gardener who mowed the lawn, the milkman that measured out the milk, and the lad who brought the Sunday papers. They had been pushed back on the Somme and the Ancre, and next spring they would be pushed farther still. Nothing mattered if the cause was prospering. When the great frost set in optimists felt that things were already improving. One might die of the cold, but for a time there was no risk of being drowned in the mud.

But the war had lasted too long. Towards the end of this abominable winter weariness of spirit more than once overtook Bryan Vaile, and he frankly wished then that the war was over. He had been very unlucky about leave, missing it in the late spring, having it postponed in the early autumn, and only getting it at last in December. He had been home only twice, all told. Not enough—experts said—to keep you fresh and lively, especially if you were not quite so young as you used to be.

The adored general had gone, to take command of a division. Nearly all one's old pals were dead or gone. One tried not to notice that it had become quite another brigade.

And Vaile was no man's dog now; sometimes with his own battalion; sometimes lent to other battalions; sometimes employed at brigade headquarters—sent off to fill any gap, put on to any job, used anyhow. He did not mind what he was doing, so long as he could be of use; he had been given a decoration, and he received just enough compliments to keep him going. It was more and more a young man's war, as people were fond of saying, and he was no longer in his extreme youth, as they often reminded him; but as someone who knew the ropes, a veteran of experience, he had a very obvious value. Indeed, he was spoken of as a competent and responsible officer. He had no feeling of thwarted ambition, but he understood that by playing "general utility" parts he had made it unlikely that he would be selected for "leading business." In the way of promotion the boys had all gone over his head; but this caused him no uneasiness and he did not make it a grouse, even during the worst hours of weariness.

Others in their bad hours talked sometimes of having suffered injustice, hankered after soft jobs, and even vowed they would try to get out of France altogether if they were not soon promoted. They spoke of their career—meaning by this not their career as an auctioneer or coal merchant or whatever it was, but as a soldier. The thing had gone on so long that they thought they had been soldiers always, and that soldiering was to be their trade to the end of the chapter. They forgot how in 1914 they had said they wanted to strike a blow for England, no matter in how humble a capacity. They thought, "If Jones is a colonel, why not me?"

Sometimes then, for a little while, the noble lesson of the war seemed to be wearing out; the higher motives, seemed to be fading or to have faded completely. It

came back to this: one was not so greatly changed after all; one still thought of oneself.

Vaile, detecting this weakness in others, resolutely struggled with it in himself.

One February night in billets, the night before they returned to the line, there was something like an outbreak of nostalgia at a mess where he had been asked to dinner. It was the headquarters mess of a battalion, and the room—the kitchen of a cottage—was used also as sleeping apartment by the colonel and three other officers. Nevertheless it was famous as the best billet in the village. The dinner was excellent—not an unusual menu, but so well cooked and so well served. A delicious soup made out of soup tablets was followed by a nice piece of stewed beef. There was bully beef, cold, as an entrée, and a fine dish of tinned apricots for sweet. After such a repast everybody ought to have been jolly. Warm, well-fed, in this snug room with no wind to mention coming through the boarded windows and the smoke from the damp wood fire not enough to cause inconvenience, everybody ought to have been at the top of his form, reciting warlike adventures of all the things he might have done if he had thought of doing them; telling the tale that made Noah laugh so heartily in the Ark; offering to sing a song; bucking, gassing, being jolly. Whereas in fact they began to talk of home—of the major's little girl, aged five, of the quartermaster's boy at school, of the padre's mother's seaside cottage; of everything soft and enervating and unattainable.

The colonel saw it coming—the nostalgic attack—and tried to stop it. When he found that the situation got out of hand he called for the gramophone.

“Let's have a tune. We haven't had the gramophone for ages.”

"Not for a year," said the major. "Do you remember how fond poor Gillanders was of it?"

"Yes, yes," said the colonel, putting his foot on the sad reminiscent tone of his second-in-command. "Where *is* the gramophone?"

"We dumped it, sir, at Mondicourt. We have never seen it since."

"But didn't C Company get theirs out? Yes, I know they did. Banks, like a good fellow, run down to C Company and see if they'll lend it to us."

Young Mr. Banks ran out into the frosty night with the mess sergeant and the mess waiter, and ten minutes afterwards C Company's gramophone was established on a pile of bacon boxes in the corner by the smoky stove and giving out its first bars of crackling music.

"That's George Robey, I'll be bound," said the colonel cheerily.

"No, sir," said young Mr. Banks, "that's the massed band of the Guards."

"So it is," said the colonel. "But I say, Banks, can't you make it play louder?"

Mr. Banks understood the instrument, and by coaxing he made it play louder and louder with every record he put in. But the louder it played the more one thought of home—nostalgia poured out of its funnel in waves, drowning one with unattainable desires.

"Albert Chevalier," said Banks, announcing the records. "'Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road.'"

"Come, come," said the colonel, snapping his fingers and wagging his head. "*That's* better."

"Mr. George Grossmith, sir. 'You're the only, only girl.'"

It made no difference what the thing played—merry

song and dance, droll duet by knock-about artistes, popular refrain and chorus; it just made one long for all that one could not have.

Vaile looked at their faces. Banks by the gramophone, two other lads standing with their backs against the broken plaster of the kitchen wall, the major sitting with his head upon his hand, the adjutant staring straight in front of him, the padre looking at the rent in the ceiling, the colonel trying to beat time—they were all affected in the same way; they were all thinking; and it seemed to Vaile that he could read each one's thoughts.

First they all thought of Gillanders and the others, who had listened to the gramophone a year ago, but who could hear nothing any more. Then Banks thought of his sister, and his sister's friend—of the cheap little forget-me-not ring that he gave her on her birthday. The major thought of Marjorie, aged five, who said in her last letter, written in capitals with her own hand, "COME BACK SOON DARLING DADDY." The adjutant was thinking of the tall young lady who gave him the keepsake when he was on leave. The padre was thinking of the church at Hornsey Rise, his mother, and his cousin.

And Vaile thought of many things, seeing each as he thought of it—the firelight on ceilings at the Regent's Park house, the children's toys in the room where they oughtn't to be, the hall of the Betterton Club, the supper table at the Gridiron, his books, his papers, his boxes of new Midget golf-balls. He longed for them all. He yearned for the smell of the theatre, the work that he loved, the social intercourse that used to bore him; for the normal, the commonplace, the uneventful; for anything except the deadly routine of adventure out here.

"Can't we have something higher class?" said the colonel, rousing himself.

"We'll try this, sir," said Banks, and he read the title of a record haltingly. "'Star series: La Di-vine Natha-lie.'"

"My goodness!" ejaculated the colonel, when the music began.

It was Madame St. Cloud singing. The lovely voice rolled out upon them, penetrating one with its exquisite melody. Her voice triumphed over space, time, and the mechanical barrier of the poor old gramophone. It was Madame St. Cloud herself, singing as only she could sing. The sweet deep notes stirred one to one's entrails, held one vibrating. The young men came from the wall, the others drew their chairs and boxes nearer, to drink it in. It was Nathalie St. Cloud, the divine Nathalie, singing *Home, Sweet Home*.

And strangely, wonderfully, this song of all others did not make you want to be at home. It made you want to be here—to fight for home—to die for home—but never to see it again till the cause was won. All their faces had changed. When Vaile looked round at them he saw that all felt what he felt, all were vibrating in the same way.

The young men stood now to a stiff attention. All held their heads high. The blue eyes of young Banks flashed in the candlelight as he thought of how the Germans had treated innocent girls like his sister's friend with the forget-me-not ring. The major thought of the death of his friend Gillanders as an outstanding debt not yet paid. The adjutant was thinking of Lewis guns and the latest thing in hand-grenades; and the quartermaster twisted his moustache and thought of his father who was a sol-

dier before him, and hoped that his boy would grow up to be a soldier after him.

"That's the stuff," said the colonel, slapping his leg. "Encore! Let's have that again, Banks."

So, as always happened to her, Madame St. Cloud was made to sing *Home, Sweet Home* a second time.

She had helped Vaile to pull himself together. She had put him back on the higher level, and he determined to keep there. Far more than the others he felt the need of stifling nostalgic yearnings and never for a moment lapsing from a lofty ideal. He had come into the war selfishly. He must stick it out unselfishly.

Next afternoon, while leading a company back to the line, he thought of the war itself. They were coming over the hill above Beaumont-Hamel, plodding in single file along a path of trench-boards that took a serpentine course through the shell-holes and over the ruined trenches. Ahead of them another company was going down the slope towards the station road; behind them at a little distance more files of dark, moving objects followed, and except for these small processions slowly filing across the snow there was nothing but silence, death, and desolation. Below them on the left lay the small rubbish-heap that had been the village of Beaumont-Hamel, with not even the stump of a tree left standing; on their right was the valley, with blackened, branchless trees through which the river showed darkly, the railway line, and more refuse of destroyed habitations; and across the water Thiepval raised a few bare poles high against the sky. The snow was not sufficient to hide the signs of devastation; it only made them stand out black and hideous, and it added to the sense of coldness, forlornness, and misery. Hanging low, heavy

clouds closed in the scene. It might have been Russia in Napoleon's time. It seemed impossible that this landscape belonged to Western Europe, to civilisation, to the present day.

Yet with the slightest effort of imagination one could see it as it was such a little while ago—say in July 1914. This valley of the Ancre must have been one of the prettiest spots on earth before hell broke loose in it.

For a few moments Vaile could see the untroubled aspect of the village, basking in the sunshine, with its white-walled houses and green orchards, its church, its school, its miniature square all full of happy, thriving life. Up here the ripening cornfields undulated beneath the summer breeze, red poppies fringed the path, and larks sang in the limpid air. The roadway from the village passed to the railway station through an avenue of sweet-smelling limes, and it was gay with traffic—farmers' wagons, old-fashioned gigs, men on horseback. At the station a little crowd stood waiting for the Amiens and Paris train—sunburnt women with white caps and huge baskets, men in blouses, a soldier in red trousers; the old schoolmaster seeing off his pretty niece; the mayor and his fat wife starting for a little holiday; one young man, talked to by everybody because he is going all the way to Paris. Everybody would know everybody; they would all be talking, gesticulating, laughing, till the station-master in his gold-lace cap appears with immense importance and says the train has left Miraumont and will soon be here. And presently, to the sound of an innocent trumpet, the train carries the travellers away all along the edge of the water, with delicious peeps of cool shade and bright sunshine, beneath the dense woods of Aveluy, by the little lake, and on to the busy, prosperous town of Albert—and on again to wide horizons of hope and love and peace.

The vision faded, and Bryan Vaile looked at his men and all round at the ugly reality. He thought of how this scene was like an endless back-cloth stretched across the world's stage. From the sea to the Alps, again in Italy—Serbia, Roumania; everywhere these valleys with rivers that had flowed blood and tears; these hills that were like the stations of the cross for half of mankind; these graveyard heaps of brick and rubble beneath which even the dead could not sleep unmolested by shot and shell. He thought of the cruelty, the abomination, the maniacal destroying fury of any war, and of the wickedness with which our enemy had produced the immeasurable disaster of this war. He thought of the villages just ahead, still in the enemy's hands—of the brutalities, the infamies there that one could not hinder. What could repay them? It was ridiculous to speak of good coming out of such evil as this, or to suppose that war can be a valuable lesson to people who never wanted to make war. He thought of the glorious youths of the Empire, hundreds of thousands of them, the pride and joy of England and the Overseas Dominions. These truly needed no lesson; they gave themselves freely, at the first call; yet one might perhaps say that in the great school of self-sacrifice they grew better and stronger still, so that they would be ready to found a new era of altruistic aims and common brotherhood. But they could found nothing now; they were all dead.

Waste, destruction, madness—that is war. What end can justify it, what gains ever balance the loss? Truly there was nothing to hope for, unless one fixed one's mind to the impalpable spiritual side of it. A struggle between two ideas, elemental strife of right and wrong, the powers of darkness against the powers of light—But that made one feel even more infinitesimally small

than ever. In the midst of that, how could one go on thinking about oneself? How could one even remember one's own existence? Then he thought of a recent phrase of Mr. Lloyd George—words welcomed out here as the best thing as yet said by any statesman. This was the war to end war. In this would be the justification and the reward, if one dared hope for it. There lay all the hope.

As he thought of it, he felt the greatness of the cause as he had never done till now. And he tramped on with a stout heart—worthy now, for a little while at least, of the men who followed him.

XXII

IT WAS the autumn again.

There had been no respites or soft times; fighting had continued unceasingly along the elastic Hindenburg Line, and casualties were heavy even in local enterprises that scarcely received a short complimentary notice from the press. Vaile's brigade, made up to something like strength again, was still another brigade. But they fought as well as ever, and it seemed to him that both the few veterans and the many newcomers were animated by a harder, grimmer spirit.

The sight of these recovered villages, the senseless destruction before the German retreat, the stories of cruelty to the miserable inhabitants, filled them with hatred and scorn for an enemy that all had begun by respecting. They realised how long and arduous the struggle must yet be. They seemed to understand how heavy were the odds against any named person's seeing the end of it. Wounded men who recovered came back and got wounded again; the twice-wounded returned and got killed. There was very little hope for each man, but great hope for the cause. That was enough; that was everything; they fought well for the righteous cause. And Bryan Vaile, forgetting all else, including himself, kept on this higher level of thought; being really useful from the professional point of view, and getting recommended quite unexpectedly for a D.S.O. to add to his Military Cross.

At last, early in October, having turned their backs on

the Ancre and the Somme and come northwards again to join another army, they found themselves established in a long, straggling village so far behind the line that one only heard the guns distinctly when the wind blew from the east. Brigade Headquarters, with Vaile temporarily attached, had a farm at the bottom of the village, and Divisional Headquarters had a modest château at the top of it. They could have done with D.H.Q. a little farther off—but no matter. They were not disposed to grumble about anything.

Indeed, all ranks showed their joy at escape from the wilderness. Going round the brigade one saw pleasure and satisfaction in every sunburnt face. About the huts and barns men were singing, sprawling on the grass, whistling to the birds in the sky. The young officers were wild with excitement — chattering and laughing like schoolboys; joy-riding on empty lorries; rushing to the neighbouring town in order to stare at citizens' wives with coloured parasols and servant girls with marketing baskets, to talk their villainous French to the old dame and her three female relatives at the officers' tea-shop, or to parade at the railway station and intoxicate themselves with the fact that it was still in working order, a going concern, with civilian trains all complete for which you had to buy tickets instead of merely showing warrants.

"I tell you, sir, it's a top-hole town," said young Mr. Pryce, addressing the brigadier at dinner. "We saw some jolly nice fresh girls."

"It would have been more to the point," said the general, "if you'd seen some jolly nice fresh *fish* — and brought it back to dinner"; and he finished his desiccated soup with a gulp.

But he wasn't ratty. He was just as pleased, really,

XIX

IN the middle of a January night Vaile left his billet at Sainte Chose and stood waiting by the cross-roads near the Mairie. Not another soul was stirring, except the sentry round the corner. The night seemed deadly silent, held in the grip of a hard frost.

He was going on leave. Presently he heard the leave bus approaching, and next minute it appeared. It was a veritable London omnibus that a little while ago had been bright red, with advertisements of *Penelope's Dilemma* and girls in straw hats on top of it, as it trundled along Knightsbridge or over Clapham Common; but now it looked black, sinister, and terrible, with its windows boarded up, its garden seats shorn off, and a curtain of sacking that hung over the door. "Nobody else from Sainte Chose?" said the lance-corporal conductor; and Vaile went through the curtain and subsided in the darkness on the laps of sleeping officers, who gave friendly, brotherly growls as they woke and made room for him.

Four hours' jolting in the bus, two hours' waiting at the station, and then daylight and the train. Who that ever made the journey will forget it? Old men forget, yet all shall be forgot before the smallest detail of that first leave from France will fade or grow colourless. One felt so much, much more than the tumult in little boys' hearts when school breaks up and they go home for the holidays. Never till then had one known the thousandth part of what a holiday can mean. Not till one had started did one make the faintest guess of how acutely every smallest bit of one was *aching* for a glimpse of England.

Vaile made up a second-class compartment with some pleasant companions that he had never seen before. The whole long train was full of pleasant companions. There were no nasty ones on board it. The train was slower than the bus had been, and it seemed to be taking them all round France instead of striking out for the channel port that cannot be mentioned. Quite late in the afternoon it was heading south, and was further from the sea than when it started in the morning. Obviously it could not arrive at the right place by midnight and the sailing of the boat. But this did not matter really, for leave-veterans assured one that if one was hung up for a day at the port the embarkation officer would make it good to one.

So all day long they bucked and gassed about their regiments and their military adventures, regardless of the placard which warned them to "Be cautious, be silent, for the enemy has ears everywhere"; or they shared sandwiches, or read one another's shilling novels, or stared out of window and dreamed with bright eyes widely opened. Luck or miracles helped them. The train caught the boat. And soon Vaile was in the saloon, having the supper of his life—fried fish, cold ham, bread and butter and marmalade, and real brown, strong, steam-boat tea;—gassing and bucking again with another set of the most delightful total strangers that one ever met. But this boat-load of strangers seemed friends in a moment, better friends than one's oldest friends used to be. Indeed, they all felt and knew that they were comrades of the great war, long before Colonel Wilfred Ashley told them so.

The boat was crowded; there were no berths for anybody below the rank of captain, but Vaile found a snug corner near the staircase, and, lying down on the nice soft

wooden deck, slept like a top. By daylight he was in England, and had just time to send a telegram to his wife before he got away in the first train.

At Waterloo there were people waiting to meet the train, and all ranks came tumbling out of it before it stopped, so that in an instant the broad platform was crowded. Vaile saw a slap-up girl in blue cloth with brown fur round her neck, a fine big, tall, slim, elegant girl with shining eager eyes; and he took her in his arms and devoured her face with kisses.

“Mabel!”

“Bryan!”

It was intense joy to find that all had come right again. The war had saved them. They were just what they used to be to each other; he felt the old good love; everything else was an ugly dream.

To this extent he was the husband and the father that his wife and children believed. That he might not be the military hero they imagined him was really not his fault. For Mabel fancied that, although he did not say so in his letters, he had been performing prodigies of valour and organisation. She attributed the stability of the Western front in chief part to his efforts; the only thing she could not understand was why they had not yet promoted him. If he had been treated properly he would have been a colonel or a general by now. In this lack of prompt recognition of his services she detected, at the best, red tape; at the worst, a very ignoble jealousy. He could not argue with her: it was easier to be a hero.

She was so splendid in her unselfish pride about him and her unselfish ardour for the great cause. She had no more doubt as to victory than she had doubt as to the justice of the aims for which we fought. She was work-

ing hard at patriotic tasks; she would work harder. She was ready to make any sacrifices. Nothing counted, not life itself, not the lives of all one loved, in this crusade to rescue the world from the brutal tyranny of a conscienceless foe. He admired her as much as he loved her.

But she must take a holiday now.

These seven days were heaven—rest, peace, pure joy. He tried to do as people had advised, not to count the days, not to say to himself, "First breakfast in England; second dinner; third night between sheets"; and so on. At tea-time on that first day he seemed to have been at home for a fortnight—he had done so much, seen so much, bought so much. But after that the time flew; and whenever he closed his eyes and dreamed, he was already back in France. It was as if B. E. F. had given him leave of absence for waking hours but recalled him to do duty in his dreams.

While fresh from France the splendour of things that used to seem nothing at all staggered him. Could this really be his own magnificent luxurious house and grounds? Seen from the outside, it was a divisional headquarters that any camp commandant would jump at; inside, it was fit for a corps commander—fit for an army commander. The richness of the upholstery, the variety of the furniture, the glitter of the silver and glass on the dinner-table, impressed him; the warmth and brightness of coal fires burning in all the lovely rooms delighted him; the neatness, cleanness, personal good looks of the servants charmed him. To sit in his gorgeous work-room—with no work to do, and no intention of ever doing that silly old work again—was rapture.

After the scenery to which he had grown accustomed, it was incredibly pleasant to find the whole of London

going strong, uninjured, just the same; thriving in the midst of the world disaster; the theatres doing big business, the restaurants so crowded that you had to book a table in advance, the streets so full of traffic that it was just as easy to get run over as it had ever been. Mabel said the streets were darker at night than they used to be, but after Anonvillers and Sainte Chose they seemed blazingly illuminated. He made her "do" the town with him, as if she too had arrived from a distance. They went to the play together, seeing *Romance*, *Peg o' My Heart*, and a revue at a music-hall; and he laughed and enjoyed himself just as much as at the entertainment of the divisional concert party. All critical faculty had died in him, and wherever he went he had the comfortable feeling that, as well as being able to enjoy, he had earned the right to enjoy for these seven days.

He found his club totally unchanged, except for the trifling circumstance that in the coffee-room there were girls to wait on you; but at the club he had an illusion of being now at least twenty years younger than the men of his own age who had not disguised themselves in khaki and gone abroad for the army health cure. They were awfully nice to him at the club, really appearing to be glad to see him again, and he had no words to tell them how glad he was to see them. But he thought he detected the fact that some of them were not as thoroughly pleased with the poor old war as he was. Out of politeness to him they hid it as much as possible, but one felt it dimly. No one could say that they were gloomy or pessimistic, yet they threw out hints that in their opinion things were going rather slowly.

During luncheon he used a large Stilton cheese, a vase of celery, and some knives and forks, to represent the formidable strength of the German position, and was

explaining how it would be bent and broken in the great advance this spring, when one of the young ladies opened the road to Berlin by taking the cheese away, and spoilt his explanation.

"Never mind," said old Venables cheerily. "If there really is going to be an advance some day, that's very reassuring."

No, he could not deceive himself. On this one matter—the jolly, health-giving war—they were not quite in sympathy with him.

He was sorry, because he himself felt in such exuberant sympathy with everything and everybody; with his old friends and his new friends, soldiers and civilians, men, women, and children. Throughout his leave he looked at the world with eyes that seemed to understand all and to love all. Each corner of London, each phase of its multitudinous life, was dear to him now, and full of new meanings. His thoughts became like the poetry of that colossal humbug of an easily humbugged age, the late Mr. Walt Whitman. Walking across Piccadilly Circus he laughed inwardly, as inwardly he sang the Song of Himself—

"Sempstresses getting on buses.

Each one is my sister.

I admire their backs and waists and their neat little ankles

Without ulterior motive. But with dreams of future motherhood.

In time they'll be mothers of men, and all men are my brothers.

"I regard all wearers of skirts as my aunt or my sister.

My love flows out to them.

When I saw the waitresses at the club I felt shocked by an aspect of incongruity;

But then I embraced them all as part of the picture.

Especially the one with brown eyes who smiled so pleasantly when I ordered and drank more draught beer than is usual.

"And these stay-at-home majors and colonels who pass me so
proudly,

Each one is my brother.

I rejoice in the thought of their safety and rapid promotion.

I merely salute them in passing, but their place is my bosom.

I am ready to bleed for them all till they're all major-generals."

XX

THE war was lasting a long time.

There was still plenty of unreasoned optimism. When the sun shone one felt instinctively certain that the war would soon be over. Even if the delayed advance never took place, Germany would collapse unexpectedly. When it rained one took a gloomier view, and gave it till next Christmas—or say till February for the ratification of a just and honourable peace.

But behind all these barometric ups and downs the noble thoughts were gaining strength, the altruistic faith made a steadily ascending curve. Now that the freshness had gone people were less local in their ideas, and probably thought more of the whole affair. Certainly one was often astonished by what the men said about the cause itself; they showed so clear an understanding of the tremendous issues at stake. Even those who had jumped at it from light-heartedness in August 1914, just for the fun of a scrap, now thought of themselves as engaged in a crusade and as fighting for the freedom of the world.

Vaile was conscious of these nobler thoughts in himself. Mentally he dwelt on a more elevated plane now, and he was supported and maintained in the higher position by the letters that Mabel unfailingly wrote to him. Always in what she said there breathed the splendid spirit of the women of England, sustaining their men with a pride that strengthened love, a confidence that could not waver. Never did a man have a better, truer wife.

Certainly he no longer wished to be killed. He shirked no duty, but he ran no needless risk. He, like everybody else out here, belonged not to himself but to the cause.

The battalion had moved in February to another part of the line, and it moved again in April to still another part. In May Vaile got a slight wound and his captaincy almost at the same time. Then, at the end of June, came orders for a move that in a moment brought back all the old cheerfulness and excitement. The division was going somewhere for a certain purpose, and the word ran round—"Battle-fighting."

The infallible signs could not be mistaken. The battalion dumped its gramophones, soda-water machine, extra tunics, and all other useless impedimenta, at a village in charge of a half-witted lance-corporal; and then, light of luggage and light of heart, it marched away with the rest of the brigade. The men sang again now; they crowed with delight on the second day when lorries and buses picked them all up to get them along faster; and on the third day, marching once more, they cried, "Oh, my aunt!" as they came down a hill above the Amiens road about six miles from Albert, and saw the sights of the vast concentration.

They were on foot before daylight next morning, but the sun was up by the time they had crossed the main Albert road; and all over the open country, as far as one could see, columns of troops were moving. Everything—men, horses, and wheels—was slowly rolling forward towards the town, the river, and the incredible swelling volume of gunfire. Not in one's wildest imagination could one have fancied that so many guns might be let off at the same moment or that it would be possible to keep such a tornado going.

It was the battle of the Somme, already in full swing.

By mid-day the battalion and the rest of the brigade had got close to Albert, and they sat down on high ground near the railway, waiting their turn, enjoying a dinner of hot stew as usual, for the cookers had followed them, and seeing sights. The sun poured down on them, the air was beautifully clear, and the flutter of the guns never ceased. A huge thing on trucks came along the railway just below them and made earthquakes at intervals; ahead of them ammunition dumps on the other side of the town exploded; some fires broke out, and then again all was clear. And all round them the scene was like Hampstead Heath on Bank holiday, Epsom Downs on Derby day, and an Aldershot review, all rolled into one. Yet there was no confusion. You merely had to take things quietly and wait for your turn.

It took them two days to get through the town of Albert and out to the open on the other side of it, and then their division pushed on stage by stage through the same astounding crowd. The battle was going magnificently, villages were tumbling into our hands, prisoners were coming down by thousands. Victory was in the sunlit air; nobody wanted to sleep, nobody minded fatigue.

In a wood full of guns the battalion was checked, and it seemed as if they would never get away from the wood and into the valley beyond. The trees here still had leaves on them; but when at last one got out into the valley one had said good-bye to the last sign of verdure. Thence onward every tree was a shredded trunk; the white chalk itself was scorched and blackened.

The valley and the slopes on either side offered a strange sight. Engineers had thrown bridges across an abandoned system of enemy trenches and were making a road, and up and down this road traffic was already

streaming—ammunition wagons, pack-mules, droves of German prisoners with pale expressionless faces; men carrying heavily-weighted stretchers; staff officers on horseback; and the walking wounded, bandaged, blood-stained, staggering. On the high ground our guns stood unsheltered, just dragged into position, pumping out the stuff as fast as the half-naked gunners could serve them.

Farther on the valley forked, and they went right-handed, across what had been yesterday's battlefield, and another system of German trenches. The engineers were busy here, too, making more bridges, opening out a road amidst the refuse of the fight, the unburied dead of friend and foe. And everywhere, up here, as farther back, there was the same crowd; infantry moving forward to relieve, infantry coming out, everything done above ground, regardless of precautions; although here every instant shells were bursting, fountains of earth and chalk flew up, and some more deep craters appeared as the black smoke faded.

Still farther on the brigade went into trenches on sloping ground near quarry-pits, to remain in support until wanted. It was very noisy, and rather uncomfortable, although casualties were surprisingly few. A lot of stuff came over, in a sullen, unmeaning style. People said that the enemy had lost his eyes and was shooting blindly; for our airmen ruled in their firmament.

But one's turn for actual fighting came slowly. Days passed, and there seemed to be a lull in the battle. Then a further advance was made, and unexpectedly the division was withdrawn. It seemed that they had been absolutely crowded out by the pressure of troops; there simply wasn't room for them at the moment. They must wait outside till an opening could be found for them.

So back they went, right back, almost beyond a sight of it.

They returned after a week's waiting.

The battle had become an institution now, and the rapidity and completeness with which its moving framework had been organised surprised one. The vast crowd, as it rolled forward, seemed to have become more orderly and comfortable every day. Bell-tents had made their appearance, huge sail-cloths were rigged up over quartermasters' stores, and thousands of small brown sheets made admirable bivouacs for battalions waiting to go into the hot-pot. The valleys had all been given picturesque names—Death Valley, Sausage Valley, Calamity Walk—and the tracks where pack-mules had stumbled across newly-bridged trenches were now broad, smooth roads over which lorries, motor ambulances, and staff cars spun along cheerfully. Light railways were running, and the wounded came down in trains of little trucks now; broad-gauge railways were being pushed on; wagon tracks, up and down, had been opened everywhere, so that the slow and the fast traffic should not clash. Bécourt Wood, with its water-troughs, timber depots, bomb stores, looked as settled and firmly established as Tidworth; Fricourt, with its salvage dumps, sidings, and snorting engines, was like Clapham Junction; and forward as far as Mametz Wood and Caterpillar Road it was all a procession of goods for delivery and returned empties. You could not lose your way, you could not take a wrong turning. Immense signboards directed you: "This is Piccadilly Circus"; "This is All Comers' Corner"; "Walking Wounded this way"; "No Lorry road"; "Water-carts only"; "Up Wagons for Scalliwag Dump"; and so forth. Military police took charge of you at the big traffic crossings, and told you anything you wanted

to know, if you could make yourself heard. This was not always easy, for the thunder of our guns was still ceaseless. Our guns seemed to have multiplied themselves. There did not seem adequate space for them. They lined every road, they were in tiers on every slope, they crowned every crest. One was nearly shaken out of the saddle by them as they loosed off at three yards' distance, and their hot breath alternately fanned one's face and the back of one's neck. And—something that one noticed at once—the enemy's guns were more active, although he still seemed in want of his eyes. All the way up there was a lot of promiscuous shelling; one saw wagons knocked over, dead horses dragged away from their burning fragments; while fresh shell-holes were being hastily filled in on every road.

Through this orderly and animated scene the brigade went straight forward, up to the high ground; and the same evening the 8th Battalion picked its way across a shell-swept plateau and took up its position in a front line of newly-dug trenches.

Next day the gorgeous fine weather still held, and all felt jolly, gay, light-hearted. One had a wide view up here, and it was easy to make out the battle-front—woods looking like clusters of white poles, villages that were merely heaps of white rubble, stretching away for miles on either hand. But up here in the white glare, it was more like what they had been accustomed to. The crowd had been shaken off, and people did not walk about above ground.

Straight in front of them lay Signal Copse, and it had caused considerable trouble. It had been attacked twice by another brigade—first in the ordinary course of business, and then because experts thought that it had been vacated or that there was nothing except two or three

machine-guns left in it. But the reverse proved to be the case; it bristled with machine-guns; it was choke-full of people. Then it was said that the authorities had decided to leave it alone for a bit, until the division on the right took Citadel Hill and the division on the left took Maison Rouge Farm; after that one could mop it up automatically, because outflanked and untenable.

One looked at it all day long; only two hundred yards away; bare poles that had been trees, a churned-up surface of chalk that had been mossy sward under the trees, a white bank that had been covered with wild roses; all bright and yet absolutely lifeless in the sunshine, not a cat showing. And nothing happened for two days. The divisions on each side seemed to be hung up; Citadel Hill and Maison Rouge Farm were still in the hands of the enemy.

Then orders came that the 8th were to take Signal Copse to-morrow morning at all costs.

As arranged, they waited for full daylight. They attacked in waves, just as they had practised so often—making dashes, lying down, and going on again. The place was given another plastering by our artillery, and then, while it still shook, before the earth had done tumbling about, they went for it.

The sun was full on their faces as the waves went forward in the comparative silence when our guns ceased shooting at this target, and the first wave had got to within fifty yards of the white bank before the machine-gun fire opened on them. The first wave dropped and lay there—half of them never to rise again. Then the second wave said "Hurrah!" and went through them. And the third wave said "Hurrah!" and sprang forward. It was wonderful and glorious, out here, with the sun on their faces, to hear the 8th Battalion cheering, as they

used to do in England, as they did last winter, as they would do while a voice was left.

It was very difficult. There was more wire than one expected. There were many more people than one expected; springing up out of the ground, catching one by the legs, firing point-blank at one's face with pistols; making pavements of the dead, trampling on the dying.

Vaile, leading the third wave, was over the great bank—it seemed a mountain high; he was down in deep, narrow slips of trenches that seemed in the bowels of the earth; he was up high again upon the top of dug-outs with incredible galleries and staircases showing through clouds. His men were throwing their bombs beautifully; their bayonet work was splendid; they tore and fought their way to each dug-out door, threw their bombs, and struggled on. But still there was the same mob of men in grey, in front of them, all round them. You killed them and they came to life again. You passed them by, and they tripped and tumbled. Vaile shot at a bellowing red-haired officer at the head of a gathered army, missed him, and yet he fell dead. His revolver empty, he snatched up a rifle, stabbed a man in grey and lost his rifle, used his fists, saw two bayonets darted at his stomach and two dead men roll into the gully by his feet. His own men were close at his back; they were all slowly pushing forward, through this bedlam of violent effort and inexplicable results. The crash of the exploding bombs shook one so that one staggered. The very earth was shaking and quaking and rolling forward in waves. All was dust and smoke and fire till they had got right past the dug-outs. Then it was a frenzy of hand-to-hand fighting for Vaile's lot, stabbing and yelling, clubbing and battering; a series of fantastic football scrimmages, in which the players threw themselves on an imaginary ball,

had old-fashioned mauls on the ground, gurgled and waved their arms and died, as the game moved on. But at either side of them the game seemed looser, they were getting the ball away, here and there the men in grey were beginning to run.

Now they were seventy or more yards inside the bank; they could see what they were doing; they had been fighting for about two days, as it seemed, but things were going well. The copse ahead was thick with the enemy; pouring out of more dug-outs on the other side. Vaile got his men into shape, all the men he found behind him, and extended them—that was what the others were doing, on either side. And they cheered again, a husky shout, as they charged forward.

Now the men in grey were showing their backs more than their faces. Vaile and his lot were shooting again—it was so loose and free. They had been fighting for a week, but things had gone gloriously well. Then it was hand-to-hand fighting for all, yard by yard, step by step—a last frenzy; and then in a moment freedom and space. The garrison had been thrown out of the copse, over into the open on the other side, and one saw their grey backs and shot at them as they ambled away.

It had lasted ten minutes. The 8th had stormed Signal Copse handsomely, and all in ten minutes.

Before they could tidy up and get their prisoners sent back the German barrage came down on the place. But they had taken it, and they hung on to it in spite of the shelling that they now received. At night they were relieved; and forty-eight hours afterwards the brigade was taken out—all that was left of it. The brigade had done very well, and everybody was pleased with it.

They marched back along the ridges, avoiding the crowd on the main tracks, and a mile or two this side of

as the rest of them. He said they were here for a fortnight certain — possibly three weeks. The Divisional Commander had told him so. Corps had it as a straight tip from the Army. They knew what they were here for — another concentration, which you must not mention, but which stared you in the face for twenty miles. The general said it should be understood that they were not “in rest,” as it was called, but the authorities wished them to do as much training as possible; so the work would be almost as strenuous as if they had really been in rest. But all work was child’s play after what they had been doing. Even the back-breaking programme of amusements that “Q” Office was busy about could not frighten them.

“Look here, Maps,” said the brigade major jovially to our Mister Intelligence, “have you found out where the main road leads to, past D.H.Q.?”

“Yes,” said Symons, “it leads to the French capital, the Channel ports, and the English capital.”

“No chance, I suppose, sir, of Leave opening for us while we are here?”

“Not an earthly, I should think,” said the general. “That is, for England.” And he smiled. “If anyone had business or friends in Paris perhaps an application might be considered.”

Then they all talked wildly of Paris. If these sleepy little market towns intoxicated one, what would be the effect of Paris? It was just the same as ever—so people had reported—scarcely changed at all; the theatres and music-halls open, restaurants in full swing, *everything* on the hum.

“Paris is no place for you boys,” said the general. “You’d be stone-broke in twenty-four hours.” And he told them how two men that he knew had been charged

one hundred francs for the very simplest sort of *déjeuner*.

"Twenty-five francs each, for the four of them. That's not much," said the staff captain portly. "But perhaps the two ladies drank water."

"There were no two ladies," said the general. "Harrison and Tower were by themselves."

"A hundred francs! Ah, well," said Jones, the mess president. "Let us eat, drink, and be merry; for to-morrow we die."

But this was an unfortunate remark from a mess president, and the general turned on him heavily.

"By Jove, you're a nice fellow, I don't think, to talk about eating and being merry—after the dinner you have given us to-night!"

"What's wrong, sir?" said Jones, looking hurt. "I thought the beef was rather well cooked."

"The beef! Yes, by Jove, yes—the soup, too! And the beef! Yes, the beef!" said the general mockingly. Then he shouted at the trembling mess waiter. "What is there for sweet?"

"There—there's nice ap-ap-apricots," stammered the waiter.

"I won't have it!" The general struck the table with his hand and turned on Jones again. He said he submitted to it up in the line, in a dug-out, the same thing night after night for months, although he didn't believe it was necessary. He would submit to anything that helped to win the war. But he would not stand it here—not once again—in the midst of civilisation, miles from the enemy. He said Jones was to go and kill a calf and give them *veal*, kiss one of those girls at the town and get them *fish*, cull macaroni and tomatoes in the garden with his own hands and make them a *ragout*

—he was *to do something different* before to-morrow night. For fun the general had pretended to be angry, then unexpectedly he found he really was angry, and after that he was pretending not to be angry. Now soon he was his jolly self again, smiling at Jones. "But I'm the spokesman for all, Jones. It's what they *all* think, though I'm the only one who's had the courage to tell you."

"Of course, sir," said Jones respectfully but sadly, "if I have failed, I am ready to resign in favour of *anyone* who cares to try to do better."

"No, no," said several voices.

"No, no," said the brigade major. "What you do, *you* do excellently. All the general meant was we *wished* you'd do something else—sometimes."

"That's it," said the general cordially; and he beamed at Jones. "It's quite all right, old chap. Nothing to be huffy about. If it had been Symons who spoke to you about it he might have said something rude. And you can't say I did. Here, you, what's-your-name, I'll change my mind. Give me an apricot."

"Y-y-yes, sir," said the gratified waiter, coming with the dish. "N-nice large apricots, sir."

"It's all very well," said Jones, still gloomily. Then his face brightened. "Send me to Paris, sir. It would open my mind—and I could bring back fish and things."

"No, no," said the general; "you are too young. *I* may possibly be going to Paris myself. And if a respectable married man, like Vaile, or Grantley, wants to go—well, that would be different."

Bryan Vaile did not want to go to Paris. The place to which he wanted to go was home. He thought of it that evening, and there returned to him something of the weariness that had reigned down south. Last May he

had had a glimpse of home to freshen and fortify him; and Mabel's letters throughout the summer were, as of old, full of courage and confidence. Their house in the Regent's Park was now permanently a home for convalescent officers. Mabel had begun by taking three or four such guests, but now she had ten always. It was an authorised establishment, and she devoted all her time to it.

When his servant called him next morning he indulged in a self-delusion that he had often practised of late. Refusing to wake up completely, he pretended to himself that he had been wounded; that he was at a casualty clearing station, in the train, in a base hospital, in the boat, in an English hospital. And the doctors and the nurses there said he was well enough to be sent on to a private house. They said he was to get up and dress at once; a car was waiting outside—to take him to Mrs. Vaile's Home in the Regent's Park, where he would be well done and very kindly treated.

He played this childish game of Suppose-and-Suppose for two or three minutes, and then rose sluggishly and looked out of the window—at the large manure-heap that filled the courtyard, the queer tumbrils in the hangar, and the archway through which he could see horses passing in the village street. It was all awfully jolly after the wilderness, but he felt an immense longing for a still greater change. How heavenly just to get away from it all—horses and mules going to water, limbered wagons with tattered covers, battalions on the march;—to see other things, and forget the Western Front altogether for a little while. He felt it so strongly—this intense wish for a change of surroundings—that he spoke of it after breakfast to his pal, the brigade major. Knowing that leave was impossible, he nevertheless mentioned the

word. He said he thought he was unusually stale, and even five days at home would be the re-making of him.

Could it anyhow be done—special leave, for instance?

“My dear old boy,” said Grantley, “they’ll only grant special leave for financial reasons. If you can say you’ll be ruined—and other people ruined too—unless you go?”

But Bryan could not say this.

“Then I’m afraid the application would be a wash-out,” said Grantley sympathetically. “What about a day or two in Paris? You heard what the general said about going to see one’s friends there.”

Strangely enough, it happened that the same evening, just as they sat down to a startlingly unusual dinner, the post corporal bringing in the mail brought Vaile an invitation to Paris from an old friend.

It was a letter from the Duchess of Middlesborough, and it spoilt his dinner by making him think of all the things that he hoped he had forgotten for ever. It was incorrectly addressed, and had been following him about for a fortnight, as he saw from the date. She had written it at her hospital by the sea. “Dearest Bryan,” she began, “I want to see you—” He did not read any more then; but during dinner he thought of her, and all the flavour was taken out of the piquant dainties that Jones had provided, and he would not have known from the taste if the principal dish was veal or the same old beef again.

He had not heard from her for a year, and in this time he had scarcely once thought of her. About a year ago she had sent him one or two letters, asking for his news, and telling him that she had been in Egypt, in Serbia, in Italy. He knew that her ardour for war work had not cooled up to that point, and that there had been nothing of the fine lady playing at patriotism in any of her

war enterprises. One did not see her photograph in the *Tatler* and the *Sketch* so often nowadays. Her husband, a newspaper said, was with the army at Salonika, and more than a year ago his famous yacht, *Amethyst*, had been torpedoed in the Mediterranean with wounded on board. Why, after this long silence, should Diana take up her pen and begin letter-writing again? What had she to say to him?

"Dearest Bryan, I want to see you." He took her letter over to the brigade office, and read it there quietly among the maps and the files of routine orders. "I am off to Paris, and shall be at the Hotel Bristol till the end of October"; and she went on to say that he must arrange to run up while she was there. "You can easily get leave. Don't pretend you are too busy. Let me know when to expect you."

"So likely," he thought, with slight bitterness; "so very likely." He wrote a few lines saying it was impossible for him to accept this invitation, put his reply in the improvised letter-box by the office door, and went on with his work. The post would not go till to-morrow afternoon. He tried to dismiss her from his thoughts, but he could not do so. Although he tried not to admit it to himself, the tone of her letter had offended him; and he did not care to own that she retained even so much power as that. When he saw the "Dearest Bryan" at the beginning of the letter, and the "I want to see you," he had dreaded what was to follow, had hardened himself against an appeal which might call for all his strength to resist it; but nothing of the sort was necessary. Far from it. Some accident, perhaps, had recalled his name to her, and she scribbled her careless summons, believing that he would be ready and willing enough to dance attendance on her for a day or two and then go.

back to his unimportant duties. He did not mind her treating him so lightly, but he could not stand her casual tone with regard to his work as a soldier. "Don't pretend you are too busy. . . . You can easily get leave." She asked him nothing about himself, or how he had fared in this last year, of what he had been doing. She thought, possibly, that he had been having an easy time of it; that he was like the butterfly soldiers whom she met at the coast or on the railway—her smart friends who carried bags for ministries, ran messages for embassies, or laid out the pens and paper for the statesmen assembled at those international councils and conferences.

Her letter was very different from the letters she wrote him at the beginning of the war—when she said it was so splendid of him to have put on khaki, when she spoke with such enthusiasm of the great events in progress, when she prayed that fate would be kind and soon reunite them. It was different from her letters of a year ago, when she seemed so eager for news about him, when she still remembered all that episode which for him had been such a tremendous tragedy. Now, if she had not entirely forgotten it, it had become as nothing to her; so slight a recollection that she felt one might naturally ignore it altogether. How astounding women can be—especially this woman. In her case, it was not the war that had obliterated the past, with all its unworthy hopes and little fears and follies; it was her own temperament and character. For her, the past had never possessed the strength of reality. She had always lived in the passing moment, without yesterdays or to-morrows. Like himself, she had plunged headlong into the war; but, big as the war was, it was not big enough to change her essentially. After a very little while she had become again just the same Diana.

When he left the office he was so deep in thought that he did not hear the first challenge of the sentry, and the man had to shout a second "Halt!" Instead of going straight to bed, he strolled up the village street, past the courtyard where the division had stabled their cars, past another sentry at the gate of the château, in front of which a car was waiting; as far as the barrier with the lamp and the police guard. There he stood looking along the dark road that would take one towards the French capital. Three or four hours would get one there in a car; it would take longer by train. And he thought suddenly that, if Diana were not in Paris, he would love to go there for a day or two.

It had not occurred to him till now, in spite of all the talk. He had felt no inclination that way. But if it was impossible to go home, why not jump at the chance of going to Paris?

Next morning his letter was still in the box on the office wall; and he asked himself if he should send another letter in its place, merely saying that he might possibly be in Paris before long, and, if so, he would call to pay his respects. Why should she keep him out of Paris if he wanted to go there? He could go to Paris without seeing her. He need never go anywhere near the Hotel Bristol.

He did not send this second-thoughts letter. He allowed the one in the box to be collected by the post corporal. It had been a passing temptation, and he recognised it as a temptation to which he must not yield. No, Diana had cut off the chance of Paris by her occupation of the glittering city. He felt resentment against her for blocking the way to a brief holiday that might have done him good.

But Paris itself continued to draw him towards it.

During the next two days the notion of Paris possessed his mind. He had always adored Paris. Mental pictures of it rose between him and his work; whether writing in the stuffy brigade office or riding round the area staring at hutments, musketry ranges, bombing grounds, gas schools, or model trenches, he had visions of wide squares with fountains splashing, long vistas of tall white houses, broad pavements with men and women sitting outside cafés; visions of gaiety, colour, careless unordered movement. He knew the place so well, every corner of it, as it was of old; but he wanted to see it under its war aspect. In a sense it was the one interesting place on earth nowadays; it was the place about which people would ask questions after the war; it was the place where he would lay the scene of a war drama if he lived to write plays again. He did not believe that its joyous life went on just the same, in spite of the long agony through which France was passing, but he would like to observe the true state of affairs with his own eyes.

Paris was tempting him cruelly. And everything aided and abetted the temptation—the incessant talk; rain all one night, making the village as muddy and odious as if winter had begun already; the divisional cars going up and down through the mud or standing parked waiting for orders in the courtyard of the château, telling you, each time you saw one at rest or were splashed by it in motion, how easy it would be to escape from here and arrive there. The brigadier was “boiling up” to go. The ordnance officer was going; and the G.S.O.’s 2 and 3. The divisional commander and one of his A.D.C.’s had gone, and were just back again.

They were full of talk about it on the night that Bryan Vaile had the honour of dining at Divisional Headquarters. This was not quite the informal gathering of the

brigade mess, where rank was put out of sight and all babbled in chorus; it was obviously a happy family party, but of a more old-fashioned sort; the elders and juniors of the family both remembered that seniors are seniors, and no one, old or young, forgot that a major-general is a major-general. Bryan sat becomingly silent and listened deferentially. Then all at once, towards the end of the dinner, he heard the general speak of the Hotel Bristol, and next moment he was speaking of the Duchess of Middlesborough. Everyone became interested immediately.

"What was she looking like?"

"As pretty as ever?"

"I didn't see her," said the general. "She didn't show in the public rooms."

Bryan had felt a wave of prickly heat, and was about to burst into the conversation with the clumsy announcement that he knew this lady very well, that she was a very old friend of his, and so on—one of those automatic danger signals that are hurriedly released when you know that, unless you do something desperate, things are going to be said which you cannot possibly hear said, however natural it may be for others to say them. Such interventions are doubly awkward when the absent person you wish to protect from criticism is more or less a public character. However, there was no need to intervene. The general was praising Diana, not maligning her.

"If I *had* seen her, I should have introduced myself—in order to thank her for her extraordinary kindness to my son after he was wounded at Festubert."

And the others praised her also, for her hospital and her various good work.

"My wife," said the G. S. O. 1; "served on a committee with her in London, and says she was magnificent."

Then one of the A. D. C.'s, perhaps only attempting to be facetious, said something that flavoured of disparagement, and the general shut up with curt decision.

"Oh, I don't know anything about what she was before the war; but I know what she has done since."

They all praised her; drifting presently from praise of her to praise of the women of her social class; passing on to praise of the women of all classes—the great sisterhood of England—the sisterhood of the allied countries that had been bound into one by the war.

Bryan felt enormously pleased that he had not committed the solecism of checking the talk of a major-general seated at his own table in the midst of his principal staff officers, and he experienced a glow of quite unexpected pleasure from listening to the praise of Diana. He believed at once that she deserved the kind things they had said. He had wronged her in his thoughts. Truly the war had lifted her too, had brought out her better qualities; and he thought of her now as the same outwardly, and yet purified inwardly—raised in spirit high above the trivialities.

In imagination he could see her, graver and more dignified, but as beautiful as ever, as she passed through the hall and up the staircase of the Hotel Bristol on her way to the suite of rooms where she dwelt secluded from the public gaze. The general had said that she never showed herself. She was not flaunting about Paris, she was not there to amuse herself; business probably occupied her; but she would see a few friends, perhaps have guests of an evening sometimes in her salon—great French soldiers, statesmen, diplomatists—and talk to

them in the way that used to capivate such people, only earnestly now, not lightly as of old.

She mingled herself henceforth with his thoughts of distraction and relief. It seemed wonderful that, at such a little distance from this zone of mud-stained, perspiring men who thought that huts were luxury and farmhouse beds delight, there should be brilliantly lit and beautifully furnished rooms where delicately dressed, well-bred, charming women like Diana handed you cups of tea, told you by a gesture to sit on the sofa beside them, and asked you your opinion of Mr. Lloyd George's last speech or Monsieur Clemenceau's new manifesto.

Diana was the temptation—not Paris. He thought of being there with her; of sitting with her at breakfast, walking with her in the Bois, hearing her talk about things. They would talk together as only they could talk. They might perhaps go to a French play—run out of Paris for an afternoon somewhere—have one dinner at a restaurant. Of course it would be all innocent and friendly—the meeting of ancient comrades—with no nonsense of any sort.

But that would not do. He had tried that once before, over three years ago. He pulled himself together and made a resolute effort to dismiss all these fancies.

He asked for more work, a request to which the brigade major readily acceded, and he sat late and early in the office, or when not busy with papers took long rides and rapid walks; but he did not succeed in occupying his mind so completely as to exclude extraneous matter, or to tire himself by exercise sufficiently to sleep without dreaming at night. He felt fussy and irritable at his work and moody and depressed when away from it. He felt unlike Captain Vaile of the British Expedition-

ary Force, the healthy, active person to whom he had grown accustomed; he felt like Mr. Vaile, the man of many selfs, the aggregate of whims and fantastic imaginings, who used to dawdle through the vapid days ages ago in England.

Throughout his service abroad he had carried with him a small leather case with his wife's photograph in it. The little case was shabby and nearly worn out after all its travels in the breast-pocket of his tunic; when his wife gave it to him he had said he would always carry it in the same place—close against his heart. He took it out at odd moments and looked at the stained and spotted photograph. "Mabel. 1915." Alone in his bedroom he laid the photograph on his knee and sat staring at it, summoning mental pictures of Mabel herself—seeing her again on the platform at Waterloo when she met him on his first leave from France; seeing her with her eyes full of tears and her lips trembling when she said good-bye to him last May at Charing Cross. He read some of her letters—a few that had touched him so much that he could not tear them up and was forced to carry about with the leather case. He thought of his gratitude to her, his gratitude to fate; of home, of the children. They all believed in him, were so proud of him, insisted that he was such a hero. He stared at the photograph, as though praying her to save him from himself.

The spell of Diana was upon him. But it was different now from what it used to be. She represented all the graciousness and charm that this cursed war had destroyed; she wove herself into every desire for things different from this prison of a village. It had been absurd to think of her as changed inwardly or outwardly.

All her power of attraction lay in the fact that she did not change. Her power over him, from the very beginning had been derived from his realisation that the common trammels of life did not bind her, that ordinary conventional joys and griefs could not touch her, that she was like a daughter of the gods ruled by other laws than ours, irresponsible to us, above and beyond our standards of judgment. This world-wide chaos made by foolish mortals could not rob her of her attributes. She was the one thing that all the abominable havoc had left unchanged. That was her charm.

Then with a revulsion of thought he swung violently from these threadbare fancies to the brutal reasoning of the commonplace. He turned to realities and the ethics of the hour. And he thought he was making a great fuss about nothing at all. Campaigning, one cannot take oneself so seriously. What on earth would it matter if he went to Paris and had a jolly time with Diana? Why not snatch at what the sternest moralists out here would call an innocent relaxation? Two, three days of harmless companionship. No nonsense, of course. Diana herself only wanted somebody—anybody—to relieve the boredom; just any pal, to frivol with. There was no danger that either of them would wish to re-open the past. One of them, in fact, had evidently forgotten it. And it could not be disloyalty to Mabel—because he was debarred from going to Mabel. He had tried hard to do so.

“Eat, drink, and be merry; for to-morrow we die”—as Jones had not unaptly said. That, too, provided a basic argument to support the ethics of the hour. Out here, if you did not do things when the chance came you were not sure of getting a second chance. You were all candidates for the longest of all journeys—to the place

where leave is permanently suspended. No change of scene possible *then*.

The temptation was very strong. He did feel that he wanted a change of scene so badly. Yet, all the time, in spite of every fluctuating phase of thought, he knew perfectly well that it would not do; that he must stay where he was and stick things out as best he could.

"No, thank you, sir."

"You won't come?"

"No, thank you, sir, it's very good of you; but I don't feel like going."

This was when his kind brigadier specifically offered to take him to Paris. The brigadier was off with G. S. O. 2; they would go by car to an important town that cannot be mentioned and thence by train. They would be back in three days.

"Well," said the general, "if you change your mind, Grantley will probably be able to arrange it for you. I should have thought it would do you good. Between you and me and the post, I don't think we shall get more than our fortnight here. But that's not to be mentioned."

"No, sir."

And next morning Bryan saw them depart in their car—two red-hats trying to look important, but to those who knew looking like a couple of schoolboys out for a lark.

The temptation had been severe. It had put him off his work; it spoilt everything. Ever since he received Diana's letter he had been thinking of nothing except himself or what concerned himself.

XXIII

THEN he received a second letter from Diana.

The post was late that evening, and the bag was brought to the office after dinner. Bryan Vaile himself sorted out the letters, and the sight of her handwriting made him hot and cold. There was silence for a few minutes while people sat reading their letters, and Bryan stood by the fire and had read his letter four or five times before anyone spoke again.

"I want you," the letter began. She implored him to go to her. "You can easily get leave. I want you now more than ever in my life. By what I have been to you, you must not refuse. You need only stay an hour, but let me see you."

"My old father," said Grantley, looking up, "has joined the Volunteers. He's nearly eighty. Rather sporty of him. . . . Hullo, Vaile, where are you dashing off to?"

"Back directly," said Vaile, as he plunged out of the office. He nearly impaled himself on the sentry's bayonet a little way up the street. He heard no challenge. He could hear no sounds near at hand. He could only hear Diana's voice, calling to him from a distance.

"I want you more than ever in my life. By all I have been to you, you must not refuse."

She had not forgotten. She did care for him. He was the only person she had ever cared for; and she was there—waiting for him. This was all that she had to tell him. What else could she have to say? By all that we have been to each other! She remembered.

In the days that followed he lived again those other days at Test Court and the farmhouse. Every minute of that time came back to him. Waking and dreaming he thought of her. He could hear her whispering to him in the wood; he could feel her hands upon his face; he could see her beckoning to him, smiling at him, drawing him towards her. Her spell grew stronger and stronger. She was here, by his side, as he walked up the filthy village street in the morning; she was leading him by the hand when he hurried past the barrier and walked along the high road late at night.

He longed to go to her. It was a yearning desire that lay outside the realm of reason, and that could not be governed by considerations of right and wrong. He knew he was a traitor to have such thoughts; he knew that he was now confessing to himself that nothing had been achieved by all his efforts to tear her out of his heart. Nevertheless, he longed to be with her—alone, they two, even if the whole world tumbled to ruin while they clung to each other and whispered and loved. He longed for her, he ached and burned for her. He longed for her as wounded men lying out days and nights in No Man's Land long for a drink of water.

"You need stay only an hour." Suppose it was true, that she really wanted to see him for some special purpose and would then dismiss him. Even then he dared not go, he must not go. At the end of his hour he would ask for another hour—he would ask to stay with her while the spell lasted, while life lasted. If she chose, she would be able to keep him there till an escort came to fetch him. Arrests, courts-martial, irreparable disgrace would all seem nothing, a price to pay that was infinitesimally tiny, if by it he could purchase a few more hours with his goddess.

These were the thoughts that he could not escape from, that he had to fight, that everything all round him conspired to reinforce; but beneath the conflict there was steady resolve still. His temptation was terrible, shaking him to pieces. And yet now at its worst and strongest, as when it had been so insidiously gentle in its onslaught, he knew that he would not really yield to it. He knew that, once understanding it, there was no danger of his yielding. Sooner than that, he would fall back on the solution of civilian days—a dose from his service revolver instead of the veronal. He would rather blow out his brains than own himself beaten.

He sent her a telegram of two words—“*Regret impossible.*”

The struggle between conscience and inclination was over; he had not yielded, and yet he felt vanquished. The contest had destroyed him; it had forced him back on himself; it had brought all the unworthy past to life again. He felt utterly miserable.

Diana had knocked him down to the bottom of the ladder that he had been painfully climbing for three years. She had undone all his labour, she had robbed him of his lofty impersonal thoughts, she had made the highest things seem valueless. He felt now that nothing could really save him from himself; that every effort had been useless, every hope unrounded. He was just the same Bryan Vaile, no better for living with brave good men, no better for the more extensive sympathy that had seemed to be awakened by the sufferings of humanity, no better for the whole gigantic lesson of duty, sacrifice, and death.

Once again he was definitely and completely tired of the phenomenon known as Bryan Vaile. Vaile, the civ-

ilian, who had been praised for laying down his pen and taking up a sword; Vaile, the decorated hero of his wife, children, and domestic circle; Vaile, the regimental officer who was thought well of by colonels and brigadiers as competent and painstaking; Vaile, the sentimental leader who loved the men under his command; Vaile, the married man who wanted to be unfaithful to the best and most faithful of wives—there was not among the lot a Vaile worth keeping alive, a Vaile worth regretting if he ceased to exist. He was fed up, dead sick of himself.

He told them at the Brigade that he wanted to be sent back to a battalion—his own or any other battalion; and they promised to do this before the Division moved.

“What the devil is the matter with Vaile?” asked the kind brigadier-general after his return from Paris. “One can’t get a word out of him at meals, and he looks as glum as be blowed.”

“I can’t make him out,” said Grantley, the brigade major. “I asked him if anything was wrong with his liver. Perhaps he has had bad news from home. He is very much wrapped up in his wife and children.”

“Ah,” said the general, “one ought to be a bachelor for this sort of game.”

XXIV

THEN he received a third letter.

This was not from Diana herself, but from one of her friends. "You will remember me years ago as Violet Kingsland," said the writer, "and I know that what I have to tell you will cause you grief.

"Diana is very, very ill. A week ago in Paris the doctors let her know that her case was hopeless unless there was an immediate operation, and that even then the hope was small; and she says she wrote to you asking you to come to her. You know how brave she is; but she says her heart failed her and she wanted to tell you. They got her back here (at her own hospital), and I fear the end cannot be far off. She asks for you constantly. I am sure you will come."

Diana dying—Diana not immortal; Diana craving for human sympathy, for the touch of a friend's hand, for a word of kindness from someone to whom she once had been dear, before she went out into the unfathomable night; and he had refused to go; thinking of her, there had not been a single worthy thought in his mind. He had been filled with selfish fears and base desires; he had thought of her as though she had been one of the thousands of soldiers' friends waiting in Paris to give pleasure to the men from the trenches; he had thought of her without one redeeming touch of respect, tenderness, or decency—and all the while she lay dying.

Lady Violet's letter nearly drove him out of his mind because of the remorse and distress it so violently aroused in him.

He was with his battalion now, in huts just outside the village. The division was to move in three days, and when he rushed to the colonel and said he had been summoned to a friend's death-bed, difficulties presented themselves. So many people were dying nowadays; and this one not his wife or a mother—only a valued friend. The colonel did not object, if permission could be obtained, but he had his doubts. He wrote a letter to himself for Vaile to sign, and sent him on with it to the brigade office.

At the office Grantley helped him. Brigade and division did much telephoning, and finally permission was granted to Captain Vaile to be absent for two days, for the purpose of proceeding to the coast to visit a sick person at the Duchess of Middlesborough's hospital. And the division would give him a car. Someone wanted to go in that direction, and the car could take Vaile on. But it could not wait. He must find his own way back.

All this occupied the evening, and at dawn he was on the road, spinning along through village after village—and always the same thing: horses going to water, battalions in rest billets, platoons falling in for morning parade, sentries outside orderly rooms, transport parked in fields—signs and tokens of the war—the cursed infernal endless war that killed people far and near; not only the men fighting and bleeding out here in France, but innocent people at home from broken hearts; that killed old people, young people, from the strain and horror of it, from fatigue, anxiety, the sickness of hope deferred; that killed and killed and spared no one—not even Diana.

He talked a little to the other man in the car without knowing what was said; he thought of him and noticed him so little that he was scarcely aware that the man had

reached his destination and the car was spinning along again without him.

It was a bright, fine day. They went through great woods, rich with autumn tints, where thousands of men were hacking and massacring the live trees; and on by timber depôts, light railways, camp after camp, a vast industry to cut wood and carry it to the war. They went up hills and over tablelands, and it was still the war—all sorts of unconsidered assistants for the insane toil—Zulus, Hottentots, Chinese, Hindoos, every race, it seemed—a host of exotic labourers in fancy dress, dragged together from the far corners of the earth and thrown into the devil's dance.

Then they came down among the hospitals, the realm of the sick and wounded—another army that seemed as big as, bigger than, the armies of still undamaged men left behind. Camps that covered leagues; newly-constructed railways, huts as long as barracks, tents as large as houses, water-towers like church steeples; thousands of motor ambulances on the roads; the Red Cross displayed over twenty miles of country, as one neared the coast—and all of it just one rubbish-heap of mutilated, still-living remains carted down here from the shambles of the damnable merciless war.

Throughout the journey he thought of her with overwhelming pity.

Her hospital had been a hotel before the war—an immense white building planted on the sea-shore, with annexes and cupolas, terraces and balustrades, a dilapidated casino close by, the beginnings of a fashionable bathing-station.

Over the doors in the circular hall one could still read what the rooms used to be—salon, salle de lecture, res,

taurant, administration; there was an estrade where a string band sat playing lively waltzes after dinner; and behind a mahogany counter one saw a few of the octagonal tables that waiters carried about from group to group of smart Parisians, drinking coffee and liqueurs before they went to a concert or a game of baccarat at the neighbouring casino. It had been a purely French resort, not yet known to the English; and one could imagine how bright and noisy and gay the French people made it. Now it was all deadly white and clean, colourness, silent, and sad, a hospital, like every other hospital—a place of torn bodies and shattered hopes, where quick movement meant pain, where laughter was a proof of stoical courage.

Vaile was told that he had been expected, and that Lady Violet would see him at once. The nursing sister, taking him along a corridor, said that the duchess was "much the same," no better, and she shook her head ominously. He was left in a sitting-room with windows that looked out to the sea; and he knew immediately that this had been Diana's own room. There were pretty things in it, such as only she would have thought of bringing to France; and on the writing-table he saw two books that he had given her himself. They were daintily bound, in bindings that he had chosen for her, with gold moons and clouds engraved upon the white vellum. This was where she used to sit till lately—till her work was interrupted.

Lady Violet appeared soon, while he was looking at the things that spoke of Diana.

"It is good of you to come. But, of course, I knew you would."

"I—I am not too late. Thank God for that. I hear she is no better. Is there any hope?"

"I fear not," said Lady Violet; and she began to cry. "Sit down, and I'll tell you everything." And she wiped her eyes. "Diana does not know you have arrived. She is resting. I'll take you to her presently."

They sat by the open window, and Bryan for a few moments felt as if life had already faded and he was a dead man talking to a ghost. This woman with tear-stained eyes and grey hair had been beautiful a little while ago, one of the group of pretty girls that had formed Diana's court, the one that was fondest of her; and now, except perhaps for a tone of the voice, a look of the eyes, nothing remained of her youth and her charm by which one could possibly recognise her. Only Diana had been able to defy the cruel years—only Diana had seemed till now to be immortal.

"Tell me," he said, "first of all, how has this happened so suddenly?"

"It isn't really sudden," said Lady Violet. "There was something wrong two years ago, and she ought to have stopped working then and taken care of herself. But she would go on. She never gave herself a chance, the doctors say. Sir John Aldrich says so. I saw her last year, when she was in Italy, and I was horrified at the change in her. I tried to make her rest then; but she wouldn't. I knew she was ill—only she is so brave that she would not own it. And she has worn herself out—absolutely. Then in Paris, just lately, she began to suffer violent pain, and was forced to get medical advice. Sir John Aldrich saw her, and said there must be an operation—as the only possible chance. And it was then that she wrote to you, feeling so dreadfully alone."

"If I had guessed the truth!"

"Yes, of course you would have gone to her, if you

had known. When you said it was impossible she telegraphed to me, and I came straight here. Sir John brought her here for the operation. Sir John did it himself."

"But it wasn't successful?"

"No, only partially. Sir John says it was a hopeless case. She had taken such liberties with her constitution. She had neglected herself too long. He says she must have been in pain, more or less, ever since the mischief began."

"Is she in pain now?"

"No. That was the chief reason for the operation. She will not suffer any more"; and Lady Violet began to cry again.

"Does her husband know?"

"Oh, yes. I have cabled to him—and written. He is at Salonika. Of course, he could not get here in time. But it would be no good in his coming, anyhow."

Then she got up, blowing her nose and sniffing.

"I'll go and see how she is getting on, and tell her you are here. How long will you be able to stay?"

"Till to-morrow night—or even till the following morning if I can possibly get a car to take me back."

"Of course we can get you a car. I'll ask Colonel Yates to see about it. She'll want you to stay with her as long as possible." And Lady Violet wiped her eyes once more. "It may be all over before to-morrow night."

The room upstairs faced the sea also. It seemed large and bare, with no furniture, no pretty things—nothing but the narrow hospital bed, a table by the bedside, and the mechanical contrivances that tell of helpless weakness. He saw this—the coldness, bareness, sadness—be-

fore he had come round the screen that stood at the head of the bed to guard against draughts from the opened door. Then his heart almost stopped beating and his temples began to throb, as he heard her voice and saw her herself.

"Bryan darling!"

"Diana. I didn't know."

Her face was like wax, so woefully small and thin, yet so beautiful still; her eyes seemed enormous, not a flash of the old fire in them, but dark, shadowy, with a faint glow or lustre as they turned in their deep orbits towards him; her hands feebly stretched to seek his were so thin that they seemed transparent. Her pretty hair was hidden by white cambric bands that bound her head and went down beneath her chin, like the head-dress of a nun. Her voice was unchanged, a whisper now always—slow and breathless, but with the deepening note that used to give it such irresistible sweetness.

"You don't mind the trouble? You're not angry with me for wanting you?"

"Diana!"

They were alone now. There had been a nurse sitting near the window, but she had got up from her chair when Bryan came in and had gone out of the room with Lady Violet.

"Darling," whispered Diana, "forgive me for all the harm I have done you. I couldn't help it. Your poor Diana loved you—loved you, oh, so very much."

He tried to speak, but his breath caught in a sob.

"Am I dreadful to look at—ugly, repulsive?"

"No, no."

He knelt by the bed, took her hands and kissed them—went on kissing them till his tears began to fall upon

them. Then he bowed his head, and wept and wept. And with her hands upon his head, caressing his hair with her fingers, she begged him not to weep, not to be sorry, not to mind.

"But yet I am glad that it makes you cry just a little," she whispered; "because it tells me that you loved me. Say it to me once."

And he said it. "I loved you more than heaven and earth—more than honour, more than life."

"I couldn't do without you, Bryan. I tried to—and I couldn't. You didn't want—you fought against me—you thought it very, very wicked and wrong for us to be happy."

She was fingering his face now as he looked up at her, tracing the line of his eyebrows with her forefinger, as children do, as she did years ago.

"Bryan dearest, you mustn't kneel—it's tiring. Bring that chair and sit by me—close by me."

He brought the nurse's chair from the window and set it so that she could rest her head upon his arm. And they spoke to each other and were silent, and spoke again; and she told him that she felt quite happy now.

"Nobody but you, Bryan, that I *really* cared for ever. And nobody at all—nobody that I ever thought of or looked at—since the time of our love down at Test. You believe that?"

"Yes."

"Your Diana has been good and true ever since. I wouldn't say it now, would I, if it wasn't true? Bryan, you do believe?"

"Yes, my darling, I believe—I know it's true."

He was with her as much as they would let him, all

that day and the next day, and during the night that followed. She was unconscious for a part of the time. Then in the early morning he had to go back to duty.

With infinite effort she put her wasted arms round his neck, and kissed him good-bye.

A FEW days later he was in Belgium, marching to the line with his own battalion, in command of a company.

They were blocked just beyond Elverdinghe village, and a message came down the column saying they were to take their ten minutes' halt here, although it was not yet due. Their next halt would be for dinner. It had been raining heavily again, and the filthy black mud oozed from every ditch and dyke, made a liquid sea upon the roads, and turned the flat, grassless fields into a sticky quagmire. The men, ordered to leave the road clear, lined the far side of the ditch with their equipment as they took it off, and themselves sat on the least wet ground or by luck found heaps of road material on which to recline.

The road was insufficient for the press of traffic. Men, horses, wagons, and mechanical transport ebbed slowly past, stopping every moment; occasionally a staff car fussed and fretted behind immense noisy caterpillars drawing guns; motor ambulances with wounded charged down upon every gap; and in all directions across the flat plain there was the now familiar crowded camp or fair that went always with battle-fighting—horse lines, dumps, light railways, field ambulances, R. E. parks—congeries of astounding little huts and shelters, brown tents, tarpaulin sheets—a sort of Klondyke city that had arisen directly the smell of blood began to fill the sluggish air.

Just before the ten minutes' halt ended Vaile noticed

two wagons of Brigade Headquarters struggling by, and someone called to him from them. It was the brigade quartermaster-sergeant, and he said that he had a telegram for Vaile.

"French telegram, sir. Came through with our bag last night"; and while Vaile walked beside him he groped for it in his wallet. "Here you are, sir. I meant to give it to your transport sergeant to send it up to you quickest."

"Thank you."

Vaile got to the side of the road again and opened the blue paper.

"DIANA DIED AT NINE THIS MORNING."

He looked at the date. Two days ago. He put the telegram hurriedly into his pocket and gave the order to fall in. The whistle had sounded.

The men put on their equipment, hopped across the ditch, and formed up. The road was a little clearer now.

"B Comp'ny," Vaile shouted. "By the right. Quick—march!"

And they plodded on again.

They had gone about a mile and a half farther when they halted after another fifty minutes, and this next halt meant dinner. They got off the road, upon some fairly hard ground that had been used by an ambulance till it was bombed out; and not without risk of broken axles the four travelling kitchens came lurching and staggering after them. All eyes watched the four smoking chimneys, while each in turn rose high on the narrow culvert over a ditch, wobbled, and then sank as the horses strained across the lower level of the field. There were no mishaps; if the drivers did not know their work by

this time, they never would know it. Soon then the steaming kettles were carried along; mess-tins were filled with the savoury stew; and the battalion, standing up, lying down, or at full-length on its face, ate its dinner. It was probably the last nicely-served hot dinner that they would enjoy in peace and comfort for some little time.

"Are you all right?" asked Vaile, going round his company, all among the diners.

"All right, thank you, sir."

"All right there?"

"Quite all right, sir."

Then he and the other company officers, sitting together on some railway sleepers, had their own food. He ate because he was hungry; he talked to his companions because they talked to him; he laughed because it was his duty to be merry and bright. But in truth nearly all that he did was automatic. He could have done it all just as well in his sleep. He was a company commander going up to the line with his company, fulfilling his contract as a temporary soldier, and not likely to allow private worries to interfere with the public service.

Presently he went round the company again; talked to the company quartermaster-sergeant, who was going to the transport lines with the cooks; talked to the company sergeant-major, who was coming on with him; and then again he sat on the sleepers. Here, for perhaps two minutes, with no one speaking to him, he thought of Diana and himself.

The spell should have been broken now. While he lived, nothing short of her death could have set him free. He had known this so well that once he had meant to kill himself, since he could not anyhow escape. Well, he was free now. But he thought of his dead love with

overwhelming sorrow and regret; thinking of all that was best in her nature, remembering nothing that was not fine. She had been so brave, so glorious in her beauty, so regardless of herself; and the war had destroyed her, as it destroyed everything.

He looked about him, Ahead, long rows of dismal branchless trees, with tattered screens like hoardings hung there by a mad advertisement contractor, marked the course of the canal. Somewhere on the right, perceptible or guessed at, were the ruins of Ypres, and far on the left one could see vaguely the broken outlines of another town. Now and then gleams of pale watery sunlight made touches of brightness on a tumbled slate roof, a pile of red tiles, or the chalky fragment of a wall; and then again dark clouds rolled up, and all was dingy black and grey. Cloudy or sunny, wet or dry, who cared? Cloudy or sunny, the guns were at work just the same. Their voices never ceased. Big and small, they flashed and spat and bellowed at their work.

How long was it going on—this fantastic universal industry of destruction that had obliterated sunshine and smiles from the face of the world, that had taken out of life all its spells and charms and glamour, that was making life as forlorn and colourless as death? The sadness of it, the ugliness and cruelty of it, were symbolised by these Belgian flats even more perfectly than by the devastated hills and valleys of France. Here, even imagination failed to break the thralldom of the dreadful reality. One's mind could not contend against the dull, hopeless misery of the landscape; no effort of imagination could restore the scene of placid prosperity that had once existed. How much longer was the war to last? And he thought, If the war stopped to-morrow, the mischief would nevertheless be irreparable. Love was killed,

hope was killed, for too many. The living were too tired; youth was as exhausted as old age.

"Got a match?"

"Yes, rather," said Bryan, fishing out a matchbox from the pocket that held the telegram.

Young Simpson, a jolly second-lieutenant who had begun the war in the ranks, lit his pipe, and then pointed, grinning, in the direction of the canal.

"They seem to be shelling the ridge pretty well."

"Yes," said Vaile, "don't they, the beggars?"

Simpson nodded and laughed, watching the puffs of yellow smoke against the gloomy sky.

The horses were being hooked into the cookers to take them back. The men put on their equipment, picked up their rifles; soon the battalion resumed its march.

Marching by companies, with distances between, so as not to block the still crowded roads, they came to the embankment where generals and their staffs had burrowed themselves into dug-outs beside the black, stinking water; and when they had crossed the canal they marched by platoons, with increased distances.

They were on a timbered track now that ascended the gentle slope towards the first low ridge; and still there was a crowd, still the shell-marked ground to right and left was like an abject sort of Klondyke city, with heaps of battle refuse, tarpaulins stretched upon stacks of material, indescribable shanties. No lorries or caterpillars now, but endless streams of men leading horses and mules as they went up laden with ammunition or riding the animals as they came down light; salvage parties, burial parties, engineers, signallers; all the supers and property men employed in this dismal theatre for a modern battle pageant.

Ahead, near the top of the slope, shells were bursting

with increased frequency, and there seemed to be some commotion among the small dark figures up there. The platoon in front of Vaile had halted, and he halted too, in order to preserve distance.

Men on mules came down the track at a smart trot, and a staff officer strolling down shouted at them, ordering them to walk their animals, asking them what the devil they meant by it. He nodded to Vaile in passing, and said, "I should think your lot had better wait a bit. They are shelling rather badly farther on." And next moment Vaile received a message from the colonel, telling him not to come on till things were quiet again.

The moment after that a shell burst midway between him and the platoon in front with a tremendous crump. More crumps followed—here, there, and everywhere, as it seemed; and for a minute or two everybody was busy. Timbers and earth were flying; wounded, bleeding mules came at a frenzied gallop; men were running with their laden horses; no one told anybody to walk now.

Vaile had taken his company off the track to a place he noticed as seeming to offer the only chance of shelter, about sixty yards to the right of the track, but a little nearer the ridge; a low bank with the remains of a concrete strong-point and some disused trenches. It was the ostrich kind of shelter rather than the real article, but better than nothing, and he made them all snuggle down there; for the bombardment widened as well as deepened, and became much more intense.

"Silly ——s!" said somebody, after a shell had burst within fifty yards.

"Here comes another! Tuck in your twopenny!"

The bombardment grew more intense every minute. They were fairly shaking the ridge.

This was the sort of senseless, boring incident in the

war that the men all detested. To be delayed, turned out of your path, to be messed about for nothing at all. It enervated one—being interfered with on your way to business, having to dodge and duck in the wrong place. It made them hate the enemy more than ever. Blast the swine! Why can't they fight fair? No sense in this back-yard sprinkling. Let 'em shoot at the front windows. . . . Crump. Crump. Here we are again!

Vaile was on the concrete wall, surveying the scene, and the company sergeant-major stood just below him, holding forth about the character of each adjacent shell-burst. The track was empty now, not a soul in sight; the crowd had vanished absolutely.

"Tha'at's big stoof, sir," said the sergeant-major, with the satisfaction of an expert. "There, agin! 'Ows, sir! That was a' eight- or ten-inch 'ow—an 'ow, sir!"

"'Ow, when, and where?" said a voice. "Ast me first question, mate"; and there was a laugh in the trench.

"'Owitzer fire," continued the sergeant-major, with jovial disregard of would-be humour from the rank and file. "Tha'at's why we can 'ear 'em cooming so plain—because of the 'igh trajectory— Ma word! They're finding our address!"

From howitzer or gun, you could plainly hear the shells coming—straight towards you. Vaile heard a big one; a whistle growing to a scream in the air; then the rending crash of the explosion, a terrific upheaval; the monstrous black fountain of earth rising close by, red-hot pieces of the shell singing as they sailed far away, avalanches of rubbish falling on you, small particles tinkling on unseen steel hats over a hundred yards off. Then he heard another—screaming straight for them.

But he never heard that one burst. He was listening for the burst; but nothing seemed to happen.

XXVI

WHEN he recovered consciousness he was being carried on a stretcher along the roadway, right back by the canal bank. They put him and the stretcher into an ambulance car. The car started, and he lost consciousness again.

Then for a long time the days and nights were all one; lamplight, sunlight, darkness, were alike full of the torture of movement. He wanted not to move, or change direction right or left, or even to form fours; and it seemed that he was always being drilled and marched and hurried forward towards impossible things. This was the inexorable order of fate—keep troops on the move. It seemed that he was carrying out the order himself, in spite of his own entreaties for mercy. He made himself fall in, right dress, number, and all the rest of it; and then he marched himself off by companies, by platoons, keeping distance as best he could—without a single officer or N.C.O. to help him. Another intolerable cruelty of fate. If you were in command of a whole army, you would get no one to help you.

Movement—to be in agony and yet forced to continue the journey. “With all respect, sir, rather a tall order for wounded men who have marched out here from Salisbury Plain without halting. Badly wounded too, sir! All right, sir; my men will do it. They never refuse; but I submit they are tired.”

An endless journey— He thought of himself as a dead man in an express train who was allowed to come to life

every time the train flashed through a station, but who must lie dead again till the next station. You had to be so nippy not to miss the chance as the stations slipped by; the effort was too great; the glimpse of life wasn't worth it. And then he had a clear perception that he was really in a train, a solid, matter-of-fact railway coach on wheels. But what train? Where? He was going to Scotland with Alton Grey to shoot grouse. No, he was going to the races—he had to ride in the big race, just when he ought to have been finishing an autumn drama. He was in the royal saloon of the race special, with the King and the Pope, and Madame St. Cloud and Miss Clarence, and Mr. Lloyd George and Monsieur Clemenceau, and a crowd of illustrious civilians. They were all shrinking away from him, not acknowledging his salute, because he was covered with blood and mire. The changing background and the phantom faces of delirium held him again.

The journey continued—on tables, in ambulance motors, even in beds; and mysteriously he began to gather correct information about himself, from things people said, from some subtle mental readjustment with regard to realities and illusions. "Captain Bryan Vaile, 8th Battalion: Head, neck, left arm, both legs; arm broken"—that was his title, warrant, or authority for riding in trains and lying on tables. Yes, he had been hit; and before the journey was over two salient facts were added to his increasing knowledge. It was loss of blood that made him so weak; it was a knock on the head that made him so stupid.

He was lying quiet in bed now, in a hospital at Rouen; and he seemed to have been here for a long, long time. "Colonel Lawford: Chest and thigh," in the bed next to

his, had died during the night. "Lieutenant Petherick: Stomach," in the bed opposite, never stopped groaning till they gave him more morphia. Morphia was what he kept asking for himself. Weakness when it reaches a certain pitch is as bad as pain; after an injury to the head sleep is as tiring as wakefulness. He did not appear to take much interest when they told him that they would save his arm, badly as it had been broken, and he did not show a gleam of pleasure when he heard that he would not lose the sight of his right eye. Yet his intellect was quite clear now; his temperature was down again.

It was a bad case, but the authorities were agreed that he ought to get well. Nevertheless, the days passed and he did not show the improvement looked for. He put out their calculations; he should have been evacuated to England promptly, like everybody else; he was too slow for anything. His nurse chaffed him about it, as she coaxed him to drink some soup and take interest. "Come now. You'll get me a bad mark if you go on like this. It isn't fair to me, you know—not bucking up and doing your best." She was a dear, the nurse.

The sister spoke to him in the same style. The matron talked to him, with extraordinary kindness, and yet firmly, as one who, because of her position of trust and responsibility, could not allow any nonsense in the wards.

She said that neither she nor the doctors were pleased with his behaviour. "You'll make the colonel think you're not trying. That would make him very angry, and get *me* into trouble too"; and she smiled and nodded. "We have done all we can for you. It is now for *you* to help. No one can get well if they don't want, if they don't try."

Then after another day the colonel himself spoke to

the patient. It had become an irritating case. It had been talked of at the doctors' mess, and the colonel had said there, "Don't tell me, Saunders, that you are going to let that chap, Vaile, slip through your fingers?"

"I think he'll peg out, sir," said Captain Saunders.

"Well," said the colonel to Vaile, "how goes it? Only so-so, eh? Are we downhearted? *No*"; and he laughed jovially. "You must rally your forces, Vaile. As an infantryman, you know your duty. Counter-attack, eh? You have been pushed back. Well, organise—get ready, counter-attack. Don't submit. Go on fighting the enemy. You see what I mean, eh?"

A faint flicker of a smile showed on Vaile's face.

"How old—exactly?"

"Forty-eight."

"What's that? Nothing! Look at me"; and the colonel slapped his chest. "Fifty-five—every day of it. Married man too. Wife and children. Got to live, for their sake, you know. Keep on trying, and *you'll* be all right."

But that was just it. They had all spotted it. He wasn't trying.

One evening, after visiting hours, when there ought not to have been any strangers in the ward, Vaile woke from a doze, stirred uneasily, and looked round. His wife and the colonel were standing by the bed, with the matron, the sister, and the nurse behind them.

"There," said the colonel to Mrs. Vaile. "Sit down. Not *too* much talk, you know," and he and the others went away.

It was just such a scene as he might have devised for the last act of an up-to-date domestic drama. "The autumn night has closed in"—as he would have had to say if publishing the play in book-form. "Save for the light,

from a shaded lamp, the ward is in comparative darkness. On the bed by the circle of light Bryan Vaile lies dying. Waking from fitful slumber, he sees his wife standing near the bed."

"Mabel!" He murmured her name, and sighed.

"Bryan, my beloved. My hero. My own true husband!"

"How did you know I was here?"

"They sent for me."

In the lamplight her face was as white as his; her lips trembled; but when she spoke it was with an unshaking voice. She must not show fear; she must not cease to hope. Stooping, she touched his forehead with her lips. Then she sat beside him—just as he himself had sat by a sick-bed a little while ago.

"Soon, I pray God, I shall have my dearest one safe at home."

"I—I don't think so."

"Oh, but—*of course*"; and her voice shook a little. "The children are longing for you. They sent their dearest love to their brave, splendid daddy."

"Mabel. There are things I have to tell you."

"Yes, but you mustn't talk too much."

"It doesn't matter. See if they are asleep. I don't want to be heard by anyone but you. Get up and see."

For a moment she did not grasp what he meant. Then she went to the bed on each side of his and looked in turn at the prostrate figures.

"Yes. I think—I am sure they are both sleeping."

The nurse at the end of the ward, seeing her move, had come a few steps toward them. Then, seeing her sit down again, she went back.

"Mabel, I have failed you."

"Never, my dearest—not for a fraction of a moment."

"You don't understand. It's the truth. I was unfaithful to you. I loved somebody else."

"Bryan!"

"In England—before the war began. Since then I have only been unfaithful in thought—for a little while."

"It's not true. You mustn't talk. Bryan, please stop."

"I must tell you. It's the truth. It is all over now. She is dead. You must never try to find out—or to guess."

"Bryan, don't go on. I don't want to know. I don't want to guess. You are breaking my heart."

"I must tell you. I can't die without telling you. I can't live without telling you."

She was crying now, quite silently, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief and looking at him again each time that she had wiped away the tears.

"I can't explain it. I did love her— And now she is dead I mourn for her, and hold her higher than I ever did when she was alive. It would be too mean and cowardly not to say it—I loved her very greatly. But it was all different from my love for you. All that isn't hateful and beastly about me came from my love for you and your love for me. So, when I had spoilt it—our love—I hated myself, and meant to kill myself, rather than go on deceiving you. That's the truth, Mabel."

She began to cry rather noisily, her shoulders jerking.

"Bryan! Oh, Bryan! Do you mean you don't love me at all?"

"No. I love you as much as ever—now."

The nurse had come down the ward, and was looking at them. Mabel gave a sob, blew her nose, spoke firmly, and the nurse went back.

"We'll talk about these things, Bryan, when you are stronger—not now. You must get well first."

Then he told her what the doctors and nurses had said about trying to live.

"I can't want to live, unless you can forgive me. No, that's like threatening you. Of course you would say 'Yes.' . . . But, if I lived, could you forget it—could we be as we were?"

"If you were the same, I would be the same."

"You could trust me? You'd let us both forget?"

"Yes." She said it at once, without an instant's hesitation. She said he was to come back to her and the children. She cared for nothing else. "Good-night, Bryan."

Now he wanted to live. He wanted to be at home, in Regent's Park, with Mabel and the children; to lean on her as he used to do; to forget all troubled dreams. He was too weak and tired still to think logically of the war, and life, and the future. He postponed that. He felt that he wanted never to think of himself again—not to be clever and write successful plays; not to be rich and leave a lot of money to his children; not to teach any more or to learn any more—only to live at peace, doing a little good to anybody, loving everybody, because all have so suffered.

These were the best thoughts he could achieve just now, lying like an insignificant bit of wreckage in the wreck of the whole world.

The colonel was pleased with him next day, talking of his having rallied.

"Are we downhearted? No!" And the colonel slapped his chest. "Up, guards, and at 'em! We shall have you back in the line by February—if Mrs. Vaile doesn't get you a cushy job in England"; and he laughed jovially.

"Come. *That's* more like it," said the jolly, chaffing nurse. "Now you're eating your soup as though you meant business. . . . That's the good effects of Mrs. Vaile. What a great baby, to be sure! Frightening and bothering everyone, till his missis has to be sent for to make him behave himself!"

The improvement was maintained; he gained strength rapidly; soon now they would be able to get rid of him by evacuation. With returning strength came a certain capacity for thought—nothing very grand, but still something. He thought of his gratitude to Mabel. Health was coming to him from her, strength was coming; he had been right down in the mud, and once more she was lifting him up.

On the day before she went back to England they spoke again of the confession he had made to her.

"This must be for the last time, Bryan. I thought of it all the night after you told me. That was enough. Unless you make me, I shall never think of it again."

"I am forgiven?"

"Yes. You said it all happened before the war began?"

"Yes."

She shrugged her shoulders and opened her hands. "What happened before the war—it is as if it never happened at all. The war has changed all one's thoughts. Everything is different."

He understood what she meant. But for the war, she could never have forgiven him; because of the war, she would be able to forget. He watched her face, and it seemed to him changed; stronger, nobler, and quite beautiful. Her lips set firmly, her forehead was puckered with thought, and her brown eyes glowed. When she spoke next her words showed that she had been think-

ing; but it was not about herself, nor yet was it about him.

"Bryan, you don't doubt ever—do you—that we are going to beat them in the end?"

"No, of course not."

"We must do it. We can't fail—with America on our side—with right, with justice—with God on our side."

"Of course not. It may be a longer job than—"

"Who cares how long? What does anything matter—how much it costs, how long it lasts—except the victorious end?"

Strength flowed from her. His thoughts took life and light. He felt that he did not want to sit down and wait for the glorious end; he wanted to get fit quickly. In imagination he saw himself at home, lunching at the Betterton Club, running down to see Jack at school, playing Beggar-my-neighbour with Enid and Nancy, going about a lot with Mabel. Then before February he would be passed by a Board and come out again to the grand old task, and strike another blow for England and the cause. The knock on the head might have been a blessing in disguise, knocking the very last of the nonsense out of him. When he returned to duty he would be as fit as a fiddle, really cured this time, able to do better—able to lose all petty personal hopes in the greater hope of mankind.

Yes, he felt, making another vow, he would be worthy of her yet, before he had done.

THE END

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